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FEBRUARY

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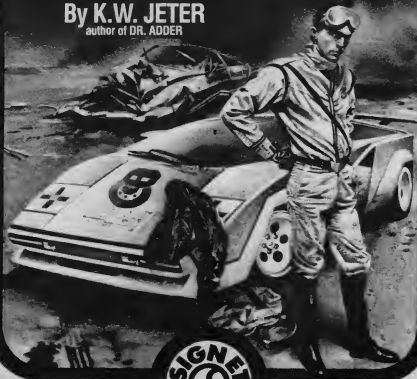


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ARBOR HOUSE

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Russell Griffin wrote the story below in the spring of 1986, while on a visiting faculty appointment at IBM's Watson Research Lab. In August, while vacationing in New Hampshire, Mr. Griffin suffered a stroke, and he died a week later. He was 43. His first contributions to F&SF — some memorable light verse — appeared in 1980, and we have since published three of his short stories: "In Hektor's Grave," "The Road King," and "The Place of Turnings." He had published several SF novels, most recently THE TIMESERVERS (Avon 1985) and was a professor of English at the University of Bridgeport. Russell Griffin's prose was sure-handed and graceful, his stories highly entertaining and sharply humorous, all qualities evident in "Saving Time." We have one additional story on hand, but there will be no others. We'll miss him.

Saving Time

BY

RUSSELL GRIFFIN

1.

Kierkegaard," the waitress was saying to the counterboy, "doesn't know his —"

"Croissant?" said Mr. Leroux.

"From a hole in the ground."

"If it's not too much trouble," Mr. Leroux added. "And —"

"You've got to take the leap of faith without logically compelling reasons," the counterboy retorted, blow-

ing his nose. He'd sneezed all over Mr. Leroux a few moments earlier. "If you ask me, your goddabb Hegeliad forbalish is full of —"

"Coffee?" said Mr. Leroux.

"*Could* you have a little consideration?" said the waitress, stalking to the far end of the counter.

"Is it too buch to ask tibe for the sibple exchadge of ideas?" demanded the counterboy. He went off after her.

It was clear from Mr. Leroux's lonely end of the coffee bar that the question of Kierkegaard and Hegeli-

an formalism was unlikely to be settled in time for breakfast before Dither arrived. That was the trouble with university towns. There were no career waitresses. No committed floorsweepers. The entire service sector of the local economy consisted of transient intellectuals preparing to settle down somewhere else.

He felt in his pocket to make sure that Dither's coin was still there. He'd been terrified he might accidentally give it to the cashier by mistake, so perhaps it was just as well the waitress had been too busy. With a sigh, he dropped from his stool, made his way past the usual wild-haired refugees from madhouses browsing the religion-philosophy-self-help shelves at the back, and headed for the door.

Still, he'd had his heart set on a sweet, flaky croissant. They were nice because you couldn't choke to death in a restaurant on them, unlike all meats and most vegetables.

And nobody had croissants like the New Athenian Bookstore's coffee bar a mere arm's length from the world's only surviving copies of the Leopold Dual-Language Library of Liberal Arts Classics — though lately the thin yellow spines of Boethius, St. Augustine of Hippo, and *Dream of the Rood* seemed more and more elbowed aside by remaindered copies of *Picture History of Cog Railways*, *Famous Pre-War Danish Plate Collections*, *Fast Motorcars of the Golden Age*, and *Sideways of the Luftwaffe in Full Colour*.

"Truth is subjectivity!" shouted the counterboy.

"Fascist!" screamed the waitress.

Outside, a policeman was writing out a ticket with his shoe on the bumper of someone's car. "Don't think I do this for a living," he said. "I'm finishing my dissertation."

"Police science?" smiled Mr. Leroux wanly. Policemen made him nervous. But so did crowds, heights, closed spaces, open spaces, getting lockjaw (he'd opened and closed his mouth three times every morning upon waking since he was five, to be sure his jaw hadn't seized up during the night from an unnoticed puncture wound), and choking to death in a restaurant.

"Comp lit," said the policeman.

Mr. Leroux smiled as though something had trod on his foot.

Not that Mr. Leroux was any stranger to the academy. He had, in fact, turned his own dissertation into a book-length study — *966: Year of Destiny*.

He'd started off in 1066, but the welter of nasty battles, incongenial Viking names (Ragnar Shaggy-britchcs, for goodness' sake? Ivar the Boneless?), and the triumph of the Norman pirates over the cultured Saxons had driven him back and back until he had stumbled across 966, a year in which nothing whatever had happened, a year which was, to the timid wanderer in time like Mr. Leroux, a drowsy summer's day heavy with pol-

len and the drone of stingless bees. Here the world-weary historian might float as in an inner tube in the fuzzy warmth of a backwater of time's stream, ruminating on things like the purity of the Anglo-Saxon heroic ideal. Beowulf knowing himself doomed but entering the dragon's cave anyway because his people had need. Byrhtwold fighting on hopelessly beside his slain leader Byrhtnoth until the Vikings bore him down at the Battle of Maldon. The grace to persevere in the face of certain defeat.

It gave their literature solemnity and majesty; their poems rang with rhetorical questions like Alas! Where is the mead-hall? . . . and Alas! Where now the riders? . . . and answers like Alas! Collapsed into rubble . . . and Alas! Rotting in the grave. Maybe *somber* was a better word. All right, *gloomy*, but if anyone appreciated clinical depression, it was Mr. Leroux.

He'd gotten his first real taste of it when the historical establishment had dismissed *966: Year of Destiny* as the merest descriptive history. Where were the theoretical truss-rods, postulatory journal boxes, and thetic road wheels to carry the train of his logic? In vain had he argued that, as nothing had happened in 966, no theory was required to explain it. Whoever heard of no-conflict historiography? they answered.

It was simple testimony to their vindictiveness that he'd had to send *966: Year of Destiny* to Holland and

pay out of his own pocket to have it set in type by Dutchmen who spoke no English.

He stopped and fished Dither's coin out of that very pocket. What an extraordinary thing for Dither to send by intercampus mail. Solid gold by the weight of it, gleaming like a new Kruggerand, with a profile head wearing a laurel wreath and the words "TI CLAUDIVS CAESAR AVG PMTRP" inscribed on one side, and a maiden in a diaphanous gown and the words "LIBERTAS AVGVSTA" on the other.

One didn't have to be a Roman historian to know what it was. An aureus from the reign of the Emperor, Claudius, A.D. 41-43, with a value of twenty-five silver denarii. And who knew how many thousands of dollars.

What one didn't know was how an idiot like Dither (not that Mr. Leroux would ever have called him that to his face), who spent all his time demonstrating against things like experimenting on cats and for things like experimenting on society, had come across a Roman coin in such pristine condition that, if Mr. Leroux hadn't known better, he'd have said it was minted yesterday. It had to be a reproduction.

Mr. Leroux's stomach was grumbling by the time he got home, but no Dither. That would teach him to be friendly with someone in Communications Science. He went directly to the garage behind his neat little home (He'd never actually used it as a ga-

rage, having had a blinding migraine the day of his driving test thirty years ago, which forced him to keep his bed until headache, test, and any lingering urge to drive had mercifully passed), climbed into his blue mechanic's jumpsuit and World War II surplus gas mask, and loaded his bellows with powdered insecticide.

When he reached his garden, he glared fiercely at the hundreds of bronze backs domed like the helmets of a mighty army moving across the petals.

"Wretched."

Whoosh.

"Japanese."

Whoosh.

"Beetles."

Whoosh.

Every now and then he would pause and listen carefully for any tell-tale buzzing. His grandmother had always told of the sweet man — a minister, he recalled — who, in the full flower of his good works, had been stung by a bee, turned red, swelled up like a blowfish, and dropped dead. And if there was one thing Mr. Leroux hated worse than crowds, heights, closed spaces, open spaces, getting lockjaw, choking to death in a restaurant, and policemen studying comp lit, it was the embarrassment of turning red, swelling up like a blowfish, and dropping dead.

When the helmet backs had slowed and the rose leaves were white with powder, he put away the bellows, took

out his third-best umbrella — one of the ultra-compact ones you can carry in a coat pocket — and marched to his freshly seeded postage stamp of a front yard. A solitary crow flapped up from its dinner and perched on the lip of the gutter. Mr. Leroux evaluated the distance, decided he was safe, and stoutly began opening and closing his umbrella at the creature. It eyed him meditatively for some time, then gave a sudden caw and flapped away. Mr. Leroux smiled with satisfaction.

"Excuse me, but is that an umbrella you're opening and closing?" asked a voice.

Mr. Leroux was put out to discover the crow had been frightened off by this intruder rather than his umbrella.

"Just wanted to share that with you. And you're wearing — stop me if I'm misreading your message signals — a gas mask?"

"Quite."

"Pretty busy, then?"

"Finished, as it happens." He turned to peer at his interlocutor through his mask's yellowed plastic eyepieces. "Dither! I was expecting you."

"I can see," Dither said, glancing at his watch. It was more properly a megawatch, a large rubberized digital that was good down to sixty feet under the ocean and could, with the press of one of its many pinhead buttons, time you in the sixty-yard dash or tell you what o'clock it was in

Togoland or Tokelau. "The Tenure and Promotion Antidiscriminatory Advisory Committee ran late."

"Reading their name into the record?" Mr. Leroux said under his breath as he removed his gas mask, folded his little umbrella, and shoved both into his jumpsuit pocket.

"Back in the sixties we'd still be working out the ground rules for debating the ground rules."

"I'd rather be dusting my roses."

"What do I have to do to make you a self-actualizer? You've got to show these authority nodes you're relating on the same symbolical level if you want to see your long-range goals concretized."

"I beg your pardon?"

"If you want to get promoted, you've got to pay your dues. Ever wonder why you're still a lecturer? I'm on twenty-five committees, and I'll make full in two more years. I could make you one, too, if you'd cooperate."

"The academy is no place for sordid self-advertisement."

"All right, all right," Dither said, looking furtively left and right. "We need to talk about something else." He gestured for Mr. Leroux to follow as he went up the steps and let himself in without so much as a by-your-leave. Manners, Mr. Leroux thought, pausing to pluck a rose for his lapel, had gone the way of the pocket watch.

The hall's still air was musty with old books, papers, and unused radia-

tor pipes. There was a shout ahead; Donalbain had just pounced from her customary ambush behind the umbrella stand and fixed herself to Dither's ankle just above his expensive running shoe.

"What is it?" Dither was asking with a pained expression dragging his afflicted foot into the living room.

"Cairn terrier." Mr. Leroux unzipped his jumpsuit partway and tried to extract the lapel of his tweed jacket from inside.

"I thought it was a brick with hair. Which way is it facing?"

"The teeth are at the front," Mr. Leroux said, concentrating on forcing the rose stem through the buttonhole. "Usually." Lapel buttonholes had vanished with manners. They were ersatz buttonholes nowadays, pseudo-buttonholes, the merest phantasms of embroidery. If you wanted a real one, you had to drill it through for yourself.

"Is there any way to make it let go?"

"Make what let go?" Shaking the thumb he'd just pricked.

"The dog."

"Leave," he answered, wishing he would. "She'll drop off at the front door so the crows don't get her."

"The birds?"

"They lust after her fur to line their nests. She lives in constant fear of being plucked naked the instant she sets paw over threshold. Like the rest of us." He unfolded the sharp

nail file from his clippers.

"I can pry it off myself, thanks," Dither said, drawing his weighted ankle closer.

Mr. Leroux bored a hole into his lapel with his nail file and inserted the rose. "Now, about that coin. . . ."

Dither hesitated a moment. "I need your help," he blurted.

Mr. Leroux was surprised and flattered. Till this minute, Dither had always treated Mr. Leroux like a laboratory rat that needed help with the maze. "How?"

Dither held a photograph just out of reach, as though it were too precious to be touched by unhallowed fingers. It showed a remarkably thin woman within yoo-hooing distance of thirty-five, wearing a hat of white leather and yellow fur that looked like her pineal gland had just exploded.

"Who is it?"

"Letitia Dross from the Stellar Physics project," said Dither. "My Significant Other." He paused to look at the photograph himself, as though to refresh his memory, and sigh. "I call her 'the Other,' for short."

"I thought you were seeing that woman from Save the Whales."

"A schoolboy crush. Then I was put on the Pay Inequities Committee with *her*. The minute she raised her first point of order, I knew we were relating out of the same headspace. She's shown me things I never dreamed of."

"Really," blushed Mr. Leroux. "But

getting back to this coin —"

"I mean *travel*. That's what her group is doing — except, well, she told me not to touch anything after we got to Italy, but after the slave auction —"

"The what?"

"I just, well, sort of picked up these two coins, you know, when no one was looking, thinking maybe I should see firsthand exactly how the system worked by bidding on one of the ladies — just a little one; I wasn't interested in her at all — and *pow*, the Other bites my head off, says our value systems are totally incompatible, and didn't I know I could have screwed up all of history and made us both disappear? Me, the original sensitive male!" Dither exhaled a great steam train of a sigh, miles of hitching and shuddering boxcars. "I've been dumped, Leroux, dumped by the most committed woman in the Western Hemisphere." He paused again for the merest caboose of a sob. "I just want to die."

"How can I help?" asked Mr. Leroux.

"By getting her back."

"Oh." Trying not to seem disappointed.

"My idea is to repattern her interpersonal commitments in my favor through a simple reward-based behavior-modification technique."

"Beg pardon?"

"Give her something that'll make her throw herself at me."

"A diamond pendant?"

"A whole new society. And I'd like to finish it up while she's away."

"My specialty is early medieval English history."

"Exactly! See, I've been doing this values assessment of America's historical development, and every time I ran into slavery, sexism, exploitation, or oppression, do you know who was doing it?"

"No."

"WASPs. Do you know what WASPs are?"

"Nastier than bees," sulked Mr. Leroux.

"White Anglo-Saxon Protestants. Everything's their fault — right down to the language! Have you ever noticed that the word *history* starts with 'his'? What about *herstory*?"

"*History* comes from Norman-French *histoire*," said Mr. Leroux with some heat. "The Saxons were a people of great nobility —"

"So I figured if we could straighten out these WASPs at the beginning, the rest of history would take care of itself. We could save time! That's where your expertise comes in — what made the Anglo-Saxons so awful?"

"Being conquered by the Normans," Mr. Leroux said.

"Yeah? When was that?"

"I was making a joke. Maybe this love affair with a scientist has led you to expect the same cause-and-effect relationships in human history, but to

say event A caused event B because event A happened before B is pure supposition in narrative form, no better than novel writing." He paused. "The forces that really drive events are too complex to understand. You can't blame a thousand years of history on the Norman Conquest, any more than you can blame Waterloo on the bottle of cognac that gave Napoleon heartburn after lunch. Only the lesser historian picks one cause and tries to make a book out of it."

"So the Norman Conquest started injustice," Dither said, relieved at having the answer.

"Haven't you heard a word I said?" Mr. Leroux huffed. "Anyway, 'Norman' comes from 'Norsemen,' looters who hit the French coast and wound up staying." Mr. Leroux started to feel better. "So why not just blame everything on the Vikings?"

"You mean the blond guys with the horns on their helmets?"

Mr. Leroux wondered if Dither had lost his sense of humor in a terrible accident. "They finally took the Saxon throne from poor Aethelraed the Unready."

"Actually, *Unraed* doesn't mean 'unready,' it means 'unadvised.' And since Aethelraed comes from *aethel*, meaning 'elvish' or 'noble,' and *raed*, meaning 'advice' again, it's a bit of an Old English joke, don't you see. 'Noble-advice the Unadvised.'"

"Heh, heh, ouch," said Dither with a glance at his ankle. "Where's the op-

pression come in?"

"How much have you heard about the role of women and minorities in Viking society?"

"Nothing."

"Social reform?"

"Zip."

"I rest my case." Mr. Leroux was enjoying the exercise, like a brisk walk along the beach without the danger of tripping on an exposed clam and drowning in the surf. "William probably won because a few days before he landed, the Saxon army had to fight off a Viking invasion, then march hundreds of miles south to meet him. It was the Vikings' fault the Saxons were exhausted."

"And now the Swedes even have socialized medicine," Dither said. He thought a moment. "So what battle *would* have turned things around?"

Mr. Leroux's face flushed. "There you go again!"

"I'm only sending out a simple response invitation. But if you *bad* to choose."

"The Battle of Maldon in 991," he snapped. "If the Vikings hadn't beaten Aethelraed's army, then Aethelraed's son Edward the Confessor wouldn't have fled to Normandy and got his cousin William interested in England." If he wanted ridiculous speculations, then he could have them. "There's quite a famous poem about it, *The Battle of Maldon*." He went over to the bookcase and extracted the thin yellow volume of his

Leopold Classics edition.

Dither smiled. "How would you like to change that?"

"Not a line — it's art."

"I mean the battle."

Mr. Leroux eyed Dither steadily. If there was one thing that unnerved him more than crowds, heights, closed spaces, open spaces, getting lock-jaw, choking to death in a restaurant, policemen in comp lit, and swelling up like a blowfish, it was having a lunatic in his living room.

"I think I hear my roses calling," he said.

Dither grinned more broadly than ever and reached into his pocket. Mr. Leroux's hand went to his chest to calm his fluttering heart. But all Dither took out was a coin. Another aureus!

"You must have spent a fortune on reproductions in Italy," Mr. Leroux said.

Dither shook his head and grinned mysteriously. "Why don't we walk down to campus? It's easier if I show you. And bring that book along in case we need details. You *did* say this thing would let go of my ankle at the door?"

2.

What exactly are 'stellar physics?' Mr. Leroux inquired as he peered at the words stenciled on the rippled glass of the door inside the square of burglar-alarm wire.

"Really good physics," said Dither.

"I'm serious," said Mr. Leroux.

"The study of the physics, forces, and gravitational mechanisms of the stars," Dither said, fumbling with the lock. "I think."

Mr. Leroux had spent most of the walk reading from *The Battle of Maldon* how the Vikings had landed (a triumph of Saxon narrative art), but then the Saxon *eorlas* and the *fyrd* or local militia had penned them up on the far side of the River Pant, and how Offa's kinsman had sent his beloved hawk into the woods so none could accuse him of cowardice in the coming fight, while Eadric renewed his oath to fight before his ring-giver. And how the Danes had taunted them until the Saxon general, Byrhtnoth, ealdorman of Essex, had gallantly and foolishly drawn back to let them cross so the fight would be fairer. And how the Danes had slain Byrhtnoth and a few Saxons had fled, but Byrhtwold and his loyal thanes fought on by the side of their dead leader. Mr. Leroux was feeling rather courageous himself.

"The very stars," he beamed. "How many academic disciplines are devoted to the study of things we cannot subject to the scrutiny of our senses? Across campus, Worthington devotes his life to the abstractions of higher mathematics, Howell sits up late contemplating the teleological mysteries of the universe, here a woman studies the physics of matter millions of miles away that she can never see or touch

— and I devote a lifetime to the study of the irrecoverable past."

"We'll see about that," Dither muttered.

In mid-expostulation, Mr. Leroux happened to glance through one of the tall 1880s windows at the head of the stairs.

"Dear me," he said. "Aren't those soldiers down there?"

Dither seemed suddenly even busier with the lock. "Beats me, guy."

"They *are* soldiers! Why in the world are they on campus? It's like the sixties all over again. Has someone rebuilt the ROTC armory? And why are they lined up only around this building?"

Mr. Leroux suddenly remembered how insistent Dither had been they come by way of the old steam tunnel from Blatchley Hall of Home Economics and up the back stairs.

"Is there something you're not telling me?"

"Darn this lock anyway," Dither said.

Mr. Leroux's toes started to get cold. "Shouldn't we wait for Professor Dross to let us in?"

"Did I forget to mention she's away? Silly me."

"Away where?"

Pause. "Washington."

"Then one of her colleagues —?"

"In Washington, too, all of them."

Mr. Leroux went back to the window. "Why?"

"Little misunderstanding."

"The army doesn't send troops because of little misunderstandings."

"O.K., I guess you could say it was my fault if you wanted to stretch a point," Dither said. "Somebody told somebody about those Roman coins I brought back, and now Washington's called them on the carpet with a lot of wild stories how I might have changed history or some dumb thing and how dangerous it was."

"Dangerous?" said Mr. Leroux. There was a definite frost across the tops of his toes.

"I tell you it's all right," Dither said as the door swung open. He yanked Mr. Leroux in by the arm, then relocked the door behind them and reset the alarm.

Mr. Leroux peered about nervously. Like all large labs, it looked like an automotive repair garage — cinder-block walls, concrete floors, and years of grime. There were racks of incomprehensibly dangerous electronics equipment on one side and obviously lethal glass- and stainless-steel-enclosed chambers of some kind in the center. But on the far side were more racks, except these had been twisted and crushed, and the floor in front was freshly patched with concrete.

"Did that have anything to do with the danger you mentioned?" Mr. Leroux said. Glaciers were forming in cirques between his toes.

"You could say that was there it started," Dither admitted. "A little something got away from them, turn-

ed out to be kind of heavy for the floor." He sat himself down in front of what was either a microcomputer or a television set with a matching beige typewriter.

"This floor is steel-reinforced concrete," croaked Mr. Leroux.

"Not to worry," Dither said.

Mr. Leroux worried.

"They had these, um, mass concentrators and some doohickey they called a magnetic bottle, and the idea was to condense gases to create, well, a mini-sun so they could study it up close. But they kind of, well, over-achieved."

"Oh?" The Ice Age was creeping out of Mr. Leroux's shoes and over his ankles. "Could you explain 'over-achieved' a little more?" He peered about warily for any diminutive fiery balls about to roll out from behind a set of shelves and fry him on the spot.

"Condensed the gases too much. Atoms got so dense they, well, collapsed. Turned into a black hole the size of a pinhead."

"Don't those emit dangerous rays?"

"The other way around — don't emit anything. It just fell through the floor over there and went down into one of the steam tunnels. O.K., I need the details for the time-space relational database. Did you say this Battle of Maldon was in 1966?"

"August 11, 991," Mr. Leroux read from a footnote in his text.

"Well, I guess part of what the guys down in Washington wanted to

discuss was how it's slowly working its way toward the center of the — oh no! What's 'INVALID COMMAND PARAMETER' mean? Where's your ESCAPE key, you stupid machine?" He swatted the top of the monitor like the head of a disobedient child. "What can you expect from a computer that's named after a fruit? Where did you say this Maldon was?"

"I didn't," Mr. Leroux said in the voice of an automaton. "It was the River Pant, which is now the Blackwater estuary on the east coast of England." The Pleistocene had hold of both thighs.

"There it is — almost directly north of that whatsis you were talking about! Thirty minutes east latitude, fifty-one degrees north longitude. . . . But am I supposed to enter the minutes or not?"

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" Mr. Leroux ventured, inching toward the door.

"A good communicator doesn't have to, guy — he grasps the essential form rather than the ephemeral substance."

"That's what I thought," said Mr. Leroux.

"No, no, it's all perfectly simple. I watched the Other do it. The way she explained it, time is like a carpet runner going down a hall, and time travel's sort of like flapping the runner while you're standing on it, and then hopping over onto the next fold, if you see what I mean." He paused to

box the monitor on the air vents. "The black hole downstairs creates what she calls this temporal warp, kind of like a bridge between the folds, and this stupid computer here predicts where the warp will dump you depending on the trajectory of your jump."

"Trajectory?" Very troubled.

"— and when it will reappear. In our case, we'll get twenty-nine hours to reverse Maldon before we jump back. No big deal for a skilled communicator."

No question about it, the woman had made Dither lose his grip. "And speaking of time," he said, clearing his throat, "I really ought to be getting along. If Donalbain isn't walked every half hour, she piddles on the rug like clockwork. So if you'll excuse me —"

"You're not afraid, are you?"

"Me?" said Mr. Leroux, three octaves above his normal voice. He smiled a Fiercely Calming Smile.

"Because I was, too, at first, if you can believe it. But trust me, time travel's a cinch."

Mr. Leroux turned up his smile's wattage.

"Would you stop grinning like a monkey? Don't you believe me?" He held up the aureus. "This is the real thing — brand-new. How else do you think I got it?"

For the first time, Mr. Leroux began to *hope* Dither was only crazy. "Even if someone could change his-

tory, I wouldn't. It's . . . sacred."

"Not even if it gave you a head start on changing all those history books when you got back?"

"They'd already be changed automatically."

"O.K., you're right, I never thought of that. But what about all the first-hand info you'd have? Think of the job you could do on all those show-offs who've been outselling you. You could even get picked by the History Book Club."

Mr. Leroux paused. After years of being a nobody, a chance to write not just obscure commentaries on historiography, but definitive *texts*. To be not just an acolyte of history, but one of its priests. Or even a bishop!

"Hey in there!" cried a voice from the hall. "Open up!"

Dither put his finger to his lips.

"FBI!" shouted another voice.

Mr. Leroux's eyes grew large. All of a sudden his interest in getting one up on the History Book Club crowd began to wane.

"Oh, for the good old days when cops were pigs," Dither said. "O.K., I think we're all set here." He got up from the computer with a parting thwack of the CPU's air vents, pawed through several backpacks against the wall until he found the one he wanted, and slung it onto his back.

"You can't escape the FBI," said Mr. Leroux. "They've got branch offices everywhere!"

"Not in the tenth century."

Mr. Leroux's eyes got even wider.

"I'm going back through that door."

"And answer a lot of embarrassing questions about breaking and entering and trespassing on government property?"

He led the way across the room in several long, fluid strides and opened a door to which was affixed a modest sign.

"This way out," he said.

"But," said Mr. Leroux, pointing at the modest sign affixed to the door:

*Restricted Area
Authorized Personnel Only*

"This? This was for the last project. Trust me."

"We're coming in shooting!" said one of the voices outside.

"Lead on!" yelled Mr. Leroux, leaping after Dither onto a metal landing and clanging down a set of stairs. He wished all this could turn out to be a simple nightmare. At the first level was another sign:



*DANGER
LASER RADIATION*

"Student prank," Dither said.

"Halt!" shouted the voice, directly above them now.

"I was maced by better cops than you in '68!" Dither shouted.

The stairwell rang with the deafening explosion of a pistol one landing

above. Mr. Leroux thought he heard the distinct *wibizz* of something going past.

"You've got to warn them first, Frank!" shouted a second voice.

"Halt or we shoot on purpose!" yelled the first.

Mr. Leroux lurched to the foot of the stairs and fell through the heavy metal fire door just as Dither heaved it open, catching only a glimpse of the third, remarkably small, sign:

Extreme Danger

High-Gravity Area

No Personal Effects Beyond This Point

Remove Loose Change

"Shortcut," Dither explained. The door swung shut on its own, and he threw the bolt.

"What about the aureus —?" Mr. Leroux asked, noting the sign.

The stairwell boomed with another gunshot. Dither bounded away like a deer, and Mr. Leroux fluttered after him like a flushed partridge. He found himself hurrying down a corridor of sweating stone and peeling paint, parallel lines of fat, asbestos-wrapped pipes overhead punctuated by wire baskets containing dim yellow electric bulbs. A steam tunnel, but not one he recognized.

"Are you sure this is right?" Mr. Leroux said, breathing hard to keep up. Someone was now hammering a hollow tattoo on the fire door behind. "Will we come up in another

part of the basement of Blatchley Hall of Home Economics?"

More muffled explosions. Dither broke into a trot and Mr. Leroux doggedly fell in behind, the hard, flat concrete slapping unpleasantly at the soles of his shoes. Still, Dither pulled farther and farther ahead in long, loping bounds, faster and faster, as though something more horrible than even the FBI were pursuing them.

A column heaved into sight like a rock jutting up from the ocean. Dither seemed to fling himself against it and carom off. An electronic imitation of a bell dinged somewhere, reminding Mr. Leroux of his imitation lapel buttonhole as he struggled to avoid his own impending collision, but his feet were strangely unresponsive. His shoes seemed caught in something enormously heavy, like molasses, yet slippery as graphite. He could barely pull each up in turn from the viscous concrete, yet somehow he sped forward faster and faster, left foot, right foot, left. He heard a rip and felt his keys scrape down his thigh and out his pant leg. They hit the floor jingling and scrabbling along beside him like a brass spider. Always obey signs, his grandmother had told him, and he jammed his hand into his pocket and grabbed the aureus just before it tore through his other pocket. He was so preoccupied he didn't notice he was being swept into the column until he struck. *Ding* went the distant pseudo-bell.

Luckily someone had tied a mattress around it with clothesline, and he bounced harmlessly off in Dither's direction.

Tied a mattress around it?

Why?

But he couldn't pursue that line of thought because — oh dear! — he collided with another column and bounced off in a new direction.

Ding!

It was like being in a gigantic — what were they called? — pinball machine! — *whap-ouch-ding!* — whose existence Mr. Leroux had lamented until the computer game sent it the way of the dinosaur, at which point he had lamented its disappearance much as humanity sentimentalizes the passing of *Tyrannosaurus rex*.

Ahead of him, Dither was no longer running so much as flying — or, more accurately, falling. Except he was falling parallel to the floor like a thrown water-skier being dragged down the hall by an invisible powerboat. His feet flailed behind him, sometimes a toe scuffing the concrete, most of the time neither foot touching anything at all. Mr. Leroux glanced down to see if he couldn't extract his own foot from the gently lapping concrete and stop when he *whap-ouch!-dinged* one last column and the floor simply melted from under him altogether. He was airborne. And flying headfirst for the end of the tunnel.

At least, he *thought* it was the end of the tunnel, though he'd never seen

emptiness that yawned blanker, blacker, or more bottomless. And there was something wrong with the air down there. It seemed alive, as though roiling with glints from the wings of billions of gnats. And the converging parallel lines of the steam pipes seemed all at once to warp downward into the impenetrable oblivion at the air's center. Then thin poles of light shot out just ahead of the confusion to crisscross into a grid of red beams.

Dither twisted his head around and shouted something that sounded like Mr. Leroux's record of *The Little Engine That Could* the time he put his finger on it to slow it down so long ago and made Grandmother break out in a nervous rash.

"I can't heeaaarr yooouuu," Mr. Leroux shouted back.

"Secoonnd squaarre to the riight," Dither called again. "Waatch youurr trajectoorrreee!"

At least that's what he thought Dither said. At that moment, Dither kicked out, hovered like a dragonfly, and then floated ever so slo-o-wly into the second grid square on the right, where he spread out and then hung like a peanut butter sandwich without the bread.

But there was no time for Mr. Leroux to do more than imitate Dither's kick before he, too, passed between the red beams. He had a glimpse of the glowing lattice flash past, but no sense of freezing in space the way Dither had, and now, as he approach-

ed his motionless colleague at collision speed, Dither quite astonishingly, well, winked out. But again there was no time for reflection, because at that moment several important Laws of Physics reached deep inside his body, grabbed him by the roots of his toenails, and pulled him inside out.

The world went black.

3.

Until all at once the floor got up and slapped him square in the face. He lay there, something rough pressed against his cheek, something long and feathery tickling the inside of his nostril. Eyes still closed, he groped with his free hand and found the cold, pebbly concrete floor. Aha! The floor hadn't gotten up at all. He had gotten down, instead.

That was when he remembered the FBI agents, and he hunched his shoulders in anticipation of the cold muzzle of blued steel that would be pressed against the back of his skull.

But no cold muzzle of blued steel pressed against the back of his skull. Minutes went by, maybe hours, and still no cold muzzle of blued steel. Finally he opened one eye and saw what had been pressing his cheek and tickling the inside of his nostril. Grass.

Grass?

"DITHER!" At the top of his lungs.

No answer. Mr. Leroux raised himself to his hands and knees like little

Donalbain and looked around. He was going to call Buildings and Grounds. Someone had a lot to answer for letting grass grow in a steam tunnel like this, not just along the corridor but all the way to the bottom of the hill.

Bottom of the bill?

The steam tunnel and the university connected to it had vanished! He was somewhere in the country. Very far in the country, because there wasn't a power line to be seen against the blue sky, nor the least wisp of a jet contrail on its way into JFK. And the quiet! He couldn't remember when he heard such quiet. Not even the electric hum of a distant thruway beyond the trees.

"Dither? I say, Dither?"

He turned on all fours. Dither was standing a few paces away, back to him, staring down a steep slope. Mr. Leroux got painfully to his feet, pocketed the aureus, which was still in his fist, and limped toward him.

"Dither," he cried, seething with righteous indignation, "that wasn't the way home at all!"

Dither put a finger to his lips and pointed down at the colorful little regatta drawn up on the beach below, hundreds of boats with single square sails of red- or green- and white-striped cloth draped idly from their spars, graceful prows curved up ever so cunningly into carved dragon heads.

Dragon beads?

"Which, ah, which yacht club is that, Dither?"

"Vikings."

"Don't toy with me, Dither."

"I was a little worried the way that program kept crashing. We could have missed 991 or even England completely. But here we are, thanks and a tip of the Hatlo hat to yours truly. So, which way to Burtnose?"

"Who?"

"That duke you were talking about."

"Byrhtnoth?"

"Check. We've got twenty-eight hours, seventeen minutes, fifty-four seconds and change to talk him out of that passive-aggressive routine of letting the Vikings cross the river."

The idea was so preposterous that Mr. Leroux didn't know where to begin. So what came to mind first was the most witless objection possible.

"I thought you were a pacifist."

"That was the sixties, guy. Now I've got the maturity to understand that war is just an alternative mode of communication. But I'm still totally against nuclear power plants and violence on television."

So Mr. Leroux turned to the second most witless objection:

"You don't know the language."

"I took a whole seminar in nonlinguistic communication once, paralinguistics. Like kinesics — body language, posture mirroring, all that good stuff. And proxemics — American males start to sweat if you're closer than eighteen inches, and Arabs can't even talk if you're farther than six.

Wonder where Vikings fit in? And smoke signals — or was that under writing systems? Anyway, doesn't matter, because you do."

"Pardon?"

"Know the language."

"Yes, but there isn't time to teach you. Oh, I admit, it's not hard once you understand that 'sc' is pronounced 'sh,' as in 'scip,' and 'ig' is like 'y' —"

"No, *you*. How's your *conversational* Anglo-Saxon?"

Mr. Leroux felt a terrible pain right behind his eyes. His pulse climbing steadily. Definite tachycardia with possible arrhythmia. It had to be a dream, of course. But hadn't he read somewhere that Asian men had been known to be frightened to death in their sleep? Wake up, wake up!

He opened his eyes hopefully. Drat — beach still there. And something glinting on it. What was it? A large sword.

A large sword?

Attached to a large arm belonging to one of several large gentlemen in dark leather jackets covered with studs. He might have mistaken them for a dismounted motorcycle gang if they had not also been wearing iron helmets and carrying large, kite-shaped shields, and staffs that looked surprisingly like ash spears. They were lumbering up the narrow path from the beach and shouting. He tried and tried to resist the Kierkegaardian leap of faith. "Do you think they've seen us?"

"It would explain why they're pointing at us," Dither said. "So how about sending off a message unit or two and sharing how much we really love Vikings?"

"I don't speak the language," Mr. Leroux said miserably.

"I thought you were an ace at Old English."

"Vikings would speak Old Norse."

"It's not the same?"

"Of course not!"

"And they say communication science isn't important!" Dither exclaimed. "I'm in the Dark Ages fifteen minutes, and already I've scoped out the problem. Different languages — just like World War II! All we've got to do is help them build paralinguistic bridges of understanding, and we're home free!"

Something like a matchstick was lofted from the motley group. It lengthened as it approached and zirmed just past Dither's ear before it buried itself *twad-d-d* in the slope behind.

An arrow?

"But we'll need a few minutes by ourselves to work out the details," Dither said.

Mr. Leroux was already in unaccustomed motion down the far side of the slope. Not so much as a jog for twenty-five years, he was thinking, and now twice in the same nightmare. And if there was one thing Mr. Leroux hated worse than crowds, heights, closed spaces, open spaces,

getting lockjaw, choking to death in a restaurant, policemen in comp lit, or swelling up like a blowfish, it was running. His shins felt as though someone were beating against them with an iron poker. His feet felt worse. To say nothing of his overworked heart, which any moment was going to flop onto its side and deflate like a punctured beach ball.

"Just finished reprioritizing my goals," Dither panted, drawing even, "and concretizing a new objective."

"What is it?"

"That grove of trees!"

He pulled ahead, but Mr. Leroux stayed surprisingly close, and in moments they had scrambled in amongst the comforting shadows. Mr. Leroux threw himself behind the fattest bush he could find as sharp shouts told him the muggers had crested the hill and were on their way down. He could even hear the jingle of their chains and weapons as they drew closer. Then the sounds drifted away. He swallowed hard and peered out through the leaves. They were splitting up to try different stands of trees, but none had picked Mr. Leroux's. He sighed with relief and leaned back suddenly. *Crack* went his head against something.

"*Goddess blod!*" said a voice behind him.

"Dither?"

Mr. Leroux turned his head ever so slowly until his nose came around against a fierce beaked one like inter-

leaving teeth in meshing gears. Just behind it were two cold blue eyes.

"*Hwaet synt ye searobaebendra the thus ofer lond Saxona bider cwo-mon?*" demanded an unfamiliar voice.

"My God, I . . . I understand!" said Mr. Leroux.

"Is he speaking Viking?" bleated the Great Communicator.

"He wants to know, uh, what warriors we are, not in chain mail, thus to come hither over . . . the Saxon land?" Mr. Leroux felt his mind making the leap of faith without permission. "Dither, he's speaking *Old English!*"

Mr. Leroux pulled back to see better. The face before him looked more worried than fierce. It was thin and sallow, bald head fringed with grizzled hair. The mouth was turned down in a gloomy semicircle, as though it's owner had just been reminded of a dental appointment. He was dressed in a hempspun robe coarse as a scouring pad, tucked up diaper fashion into a rope belt to leave his legs free for running. His shins were scarred and welted, and he wore a pair of crude leather sandals. Except for the hooded cape of small skins stitched roughly together, rabbit fur still on them, he had a monastic air to him.

He reached out and felt the fabric of Dither's sleeve between his thin thumb and forefinger, then raised his eyebrows in admiration. "*Fro Dane-lond?*"

"One of our miracle fabrics," Dither said. "Polyester — just wash and drip-dry, no muss, no fuss."

" *Ic sceal eower frumcyn witan,*" the man said, poking a long dagger at them threateningly.

"He wants to know our lineage," Mr. Leroux quavered. "How nice — I've always maintained an active interest in gencalogy."

"*Aer ge fyr heonan, wiccas.*"

"Before we go further — *wiccas?* But we're not witches! Oh dear, it's so much harder to speak Old English than to hear it, Dither. If only you'd given me time to brush up! Now see here, there's been a misunderstanding, my good man. Um, ur, well, uh, *gumcynnes*, oh dear, ur, *wiccas nat, professora leode.* . . ."

"What'd you tell him?" Dither said.

"That we're from a tribe of college professors."

"AAUP," Dither added brightly. "It's practically a union, brother, true members of the folk, listen to Pete Seeger all the time, you know, dreamt I saw Joe Hill last night, the buck-wheat in her eye, says I —"

The man's long hand slapped wetly across Dither's mouth. "*Sc!*"

"That's 'shh,'" Mr. Leroux explained.

"I-mrph-*know*," Dither said.

The man's other hand pressed the dagger point into the soft spot at the base of Mr. Leroux's throat. On the sunlit hillside beyond, the Vikings were returning to confer, their bright

metal helmets golden in the afternoon sun, their pointed shields like segmented thoraxes, lances waving like antennae. One of them seemed to be suggesting the shadows where Mr. Leroux crouched, and Mr. Leroux felt the knife press harder. He wanted to scream, but he decided to be very, very quiet instead. In the interest of interepochal cooperation.

The Vikings began to advance purposefully toward them.

"*Scit!*" groaned the man.

"Hey, I'm really understanding this Anglo-Saxon stuff!" Dither said.

The man threw himself at Dither to shut him up just as more Vikings appeared at the top of the hill. There was a terrible moment when it looked like they'd come down, but they called insistently to the others until the first group wheeled and ran back up. Their captor let out a long sigh, then scrambled to his feet, pulling Mr. Leroux up by the throat like a recalcitrant carrot.

"Dear me," said Mr. Leroux in the voice of someone choking in a restaurant.

"*Cumath!*" said the man. He gave Mr. Leroux a shove.

"It's O.K., really," Dither said. "We'll have them sharing their thoughts and feelings with us in no time." He looked at his megawatch. "Which is a lucky thing, because we're down to twenty-seven hours, forty-three minutes, twenty-nine seconds plus."

At first they jogged from grove to grove to avoid being seen by the main body of Vikings, wherever they were, but mere minutes from myocardial infarction, the man decided they could risk slowing their pace.

"I had no wish to harm you," their captor announced lugubriously, "but I did not wish the spear-strangers to find us and slit our nose-holes before you could work your spell, though no doubt Wyrð will send a hailstorm and kill us all anyway."

"What's 'Wyrð'?" asked Dither when Mr. Leroux had translated.

"Fate. It's where we get 'weird,' if that gives you any idea. We'd like to help, really," he added, pleased to note how adept he was getting at expressing himself in the mother tongue. "But I don't see how."

"Get his name," said Dither. "First law of communications — you can't without first names."

"*Hwaet bist þin nama?*" asked Mr. Leroux.

The man sighed. "Dreorig."

"Did you say Dreary?"

"Wow — one of the original seven dwarfs!" said Dither.

"He's not a dwarf," Mr. Leroux objected.

"See how things are exaggerated when they're handed down from father to son? The technical term in comm theory is 'snowballing.' You can call me Dither, big guy."

"What trouble do you have, that we may ease it?" said Mr. Leroux.

"First came the Romans and built many temples and halls," said Dreorig. "And now they are dead and their great works in ruins. Then came King Arthur, but my ancestors slew him, and now he sleeps with the roots and turnips. After him came Aethelfrith and Oswald, Offa and Alfred the Great. Ubi sunt, alas? Where are they now?"

"Decomposing?" ventured Mr. Leroux.

"Ahh!" groaned Dreorig, so loudly it made Mr. Leroux jump. "Life is gone faster than the freshness of baked bread."

"Tell me," said Mr. Leroux, "are you bothered by crowds or heights?"

"I could have been happy staring at an ox's arse behind a plow and with luck died young," Dreorig said. "But no, I had to better myself, learn to read and write; I had to be a lay brother to the demon-monks at Winchester. Up before cockcrow to sing all fifty-five psalms at Matins; up again for Prime at dawn; then self-mortification, laving, and chapter meeting; then flogging; then Mass; then mixing honey and lampblack for the scriptorium ink and sharpening the quills for the scribes and limners; then flogging again; then singing Terce and High Mass; then Sext at noon and a crust of bread or porridge, if it wasn't a fast day; then labor in the garden, followed by a good flogging; then Vespers; and finally Compline, flogging if needed, then a few moments sleep — on

your stomach — and up for Matins. Over and over and over again."

"Sounds like a lot of flogging," said Mr. Leroux.

"A hundred monks, and who do you suppose got it on the backside? The single lay brother. Somebody spill the ink and make the floor sticky? Mortify the lay brother's bottom. Somebody didn't sharpen enough quills? Cut a fresh willow switch and teach the lay brother's hindquarters humility. Fast day again? Cut down a small tree and make an example of the lay brother's rear. Take it from me, never learn to read or write."

"A hard life."

"Nothing compared to now. A while ago, our abbot lost a wager to the abbot of Lindisfarne, but the weather is too unpredictable this time of year to make travel pleasant. What to do? Have the lay brother deliver the forfeit — a magnificent book, with garnets set in the wood cover, pages inside all bordered with twining gilt acanthus leaves, illuminated capitals thicker than daisies in the mead, and not a word about God anywhere — all battle poetry. Still, who am I to judge? Yet little wonder that on the way I was set upon and robbed of it. Luckily, before I had to choose whether to go back and be flogged to death or hide in the woods and starve, some soldiers caught me and beat me until I joined the fyrd." He shook his head gloomily. " *Ic buile waes ende-saeta, aegwearde beolde the on land*

*saxona latbra maenig mid scipberge
scetban ne meabte."*

"What'd he say?" Dither asked.

"Since then he's been the coast guard, keeping watch by sea so no hostile people could raid here."

"In the endless rain and snow," Dreorig added. "But though blindness clouds my eyes and rheum stiffens my joints and death prowls outside my bone-house like the hungry wolf, I do not much complain."

"He finds the work unrewarding," Mr. Leroux said.

"Because now my prayers are answered," said Dreorig, archly laying a finger beside his nose.

"How so?" said Mr. Leroux.

"Aren't we the sly one," grinned Dreorig. "Now look, you witch me back my book, and I'll let you go. Just be quick; we're pretty close to the lines, and a guard could spot us anytime."

"You mean Vikings?"

"*Abidath!*" commanded a voice.

"Too late," Dreorig groaned.

Several soldiers materialized from the trees on either side of the road.

"Good work, book-warrior," beamed a master-at-arms. "You've caught us some leassceawearas!"

"Thank you, master," said Dreorig grimly.

Leassceawearas, leassceawearas, thought Mr. Leroux. He had run into that word somewhere. Good grief. "But we're not spies!"

"We will take them where the cor-

las can beat the truth out of them," the master-at-arms said.

"I warned you," Dreorig shrugged.

They reached the crest of the hill, and before them in the reddening sun loomed a further hill bristling with bright flags and pennants, surging with men in glinting ring mail. The camp of Byrhtnoth, caldorman of Essex.

"I thought there was one more hill," Dreorig said. "That's what I get for learning to read instead of hunt."

As they drew closer, a pack of camp dogs began to bark. Soon the soldiers, attracted by the mad baying, were collecting along the road.

"*Naefre ic geseab in selcutbun byrnum thonne sint git!*" shouted one, pointing joyfully at them. The rest laughed boisterously as drunks in the bleachers of Yankee Stadium.

"He says he's never seen carls in stranger armor," Mr. Leroux said.

"He means your jumpsuit," said Dither.

"I couldn't very well dust roses in my Harris tweed, could I?" Mr. Leroux said. "I suppose you think your designer jeans and tennis sneakers blend right in here."

"Running shoes, please."

The master-at-arms urged them along the gauntlet of gawking soldiers. Faces swelled and receded on either side; fingers poked them below the ribs and pinched their upper arms. Mr. Leroux found his breathing rapid and shallow. He was hyperven-

tilating. Anxiety attack. And there probably wasn't a single paper bag to put over his head anywhere between here and London.

Just in time, the master-at-arms halted by an ancient oak tree, gloriously gold in autumn foliage. A soldier who'd followed down the gauntlet suddenly tackled Dither and sent him sprawling. In an instant he'd straddled Dither's back and was twisting Dither's right leg the wrong way.

"Isn't this a violation of something?" Dither shouted.

The soldier drew a long dagger out of his wide belt.

"AGH!" screamed Dither.

The man rammed the knife under the laces of the shoe and sawed. The laces gave with a snap-sproing, and he rocked back with his prize, then removed the other shoe the same way and held up both for all to admire.

"I've seen the past," said Mr. Leroux to no one in particular. "And it doesn't work."

4.

It was almost dark. Dreorig, assigned to help guard his prisoners until they were interrogated, shifted his weight against a tree, scratched, and yawned like an old hound, watching for a chance to continue his discussion with Mr. Leroux; but the other guards, though drowsy from a recent march, remained vigilant.

Mr. Leroux tried to calm himself by

pulling his little Leopold Classics *Battle of Maldon* out of his coveralls, but he tore the yellow front cover getting it out, and it was too dark to read anyway.

All around them, campfires gleamed as the brightness faded from the sky, and the air rustled with mutterings of comrades and urgent murmurs of *ego te absolvo* as the holy men passed among them to hear confession. Nearby was a striped pavilion where Byrhtnoth (or whoever it was — a part of Mr. Leroux had not yet yielded, like Scrooge still hoping Marley was a bit of undigested cheese) was presumably huddled with his lieutenants. If only Mr. Leroux could go and explain how they meant to help, but that tent, close as it was, might as well have been a thousand miles away, so tightly was it guarded by a special cadre of blond, blue-eyed giants. As he tried to explain to Dither, you didn't just walk up to a Saxon ealdorman and tell him not to let the Vikings cross the river. Or anything else.

Mr. Leroux's eyes drifted from there to the Viking campfires on the southern hillside opposite. Would there truly be a battle tomorrow, centuries-dead men alive again to die a second time? Would it be like a television instant replay, or was this dreadful thing about to happen again, *really* happen, and all the alternate consequences revived as possibilities?

His gaze traveled up to the more

distant stars. How clear they were, not a breath of pollution or glimmer of city lights to obscure them. And motionless — none moved to reveal themselves the landing lights of an errant airplane. They were familiar yet not quite right, set in the subtly different relationships of the sky a thousand years before he was born. At least he could find the boxy Big Dipper. No, even that would be different in this year — it would be Arthur's Wagon that wheeled ponderously above them, or Charles's Wain, the wagon of Charlemagne. Yes, there it was, the cup of the dipper just a little narrower and deeper.

Would he ever get back home? How he missed even the Japanese beetles and the crows. If only he could get back, he'd fall on his knees and kiss his carpet.

Except, of course, by now poor little Donalbain had piddled on it.

His gaze dropped earthward and found Dither. He was seated in the ruddy glow of the campfire, staring at his stockinged feet. In the ankle of one was a neat crescent of perforations from Donalbain's tiny teeth, but Mr. Leroux refused to have any sympathy. If it hadn't been for Dither, Mr. Leroux would be home, listening to the reassuring sounds of burglars prowling the side of his house. Mr. Leroux fixed him with a steely stare.

"We seem to be in something of a pickle."

"Oh, I anticipated all this in my

preplanning," Dither replied with infuriating equanimity.

"Like losing your shoes?"

"Don't sweat the small stuff."

"Do you know what will happen if they decide we're Viking spies?" Mr. Leroux said. "We could be drawn and quartered."

"They always say that in movies," Dither said. "What does it mean, anyway?"

"Having your hands and feet tied to four horses, which are then driven in four different directions," said Mr. Leroux.

"Hey, trust me, will you? I've got what we need to turn this thing around right in my backpack."

"A gun?"

"Better."

"A machine gun?"

"An overhead projector."

"What?"

"O.K., O.K.," Dither said. "I admit TV's your ultimate message-carrying media."

"Medium."

"But my chairman signed out the department video camera for his kid's dance recital this weekend or something. But it wouldn't have worked here anyway."

"Oh?" Mr. Leroux felt his forehead getting hot.

"You need a TV to play it back on, and even you've got to admit these guys don't seem to have a whole lot of TVs."

He checked his pulse to make sure

it wasn't elevated. "What can you do with an overhead projector?"

"A lot of people say that. They all go for your glamour media — TV, local area computer networks, lasers. But the overhead projector's a *proven* technology." With that, Dither extracted something like a long-necked metal goose from his backpack. Luckily, the exhausted guards were dozing on their spears like public-works men at their shovels, even Dreorig.

"What can you possibly have in mind, Dither?"

"We project our message on the wall of Burnose's tent over there — backwards, so he can read it inside — and presto! Communication link established! I've got everything planned out."

Mr. Leroux chewed his lip. "What if he can't read?"

Dither smiled triumphantly. "He can get a priest."

"I see," said Mr. Leroux as he reached behind the projector and held up a three-pronged plug. "And this?"

Dither's eyes went dull as nickels, and he sank onto his haunches and hunched his long back to stare disconsolately into the fire. Mr. Leroux was about to regret breaking it to him that way when Dither leapt onto his stockinged feet again. "What's electricity?" he demanded.

"Something that lurks in wall plugs."

"Controlled heat. And what's your

most basic form of heat? Right in front of you, guy — fire!" He pulled a package of clear plastic sheets and a Magic Marker from his backpack. "Well, come on, what are you waiting for?"

"I'm supposed to write something on these?"

"Haven't you ever used an overhead projector? Tell Burtnose to attack those Vikings before they cross the river."

"But I haven't composed in Old English since graduate school, and then it was always things like, 'The hero is hacking the Dane' or, 'Alas, the thane is dead by his falcon.'"

"Just do your best."

Mr. Leroux sighed and sat down and, trying to keep the slippery pile of plastic sheets from sliding off his knee, began for the first time in history to compose an Old English sentence with a Magic Marger on a transparent sheet.

And stopped at the first word.

What was the imperative of "stay"? The words had come to him easily enough when he was talking, but writing was so much more formal, and any infelicities of style or syntax so permanent. He checked the back of his Leopold Classic, but the glossary pages were gone, and anyway, it contained only vocabulary from *The Battle of Maldon*. If he just had his Klaeber third edition of *Beowulf* or his tattered *Cook's Revised Sievers's Old-English Grammar*. And even if he solv-

ed "stay," there was the imponderable of "river." Did *stream*, *streamas* mean modern stream, or did it apply only to ocean currents? He remembered *stream-wielm* — maybe that was it. But should he put it in the dative or the accusative?

He took a deep breath and committed himself.

Laetst — squeaked his Magic Marker, *thu* —

All of a sudden the plastic crumbled into dust under his felt tip. "Dither — it disintegrated."

"It's been awhile since anybody in the department used the stuff; could be a little brittle."

He began another sheet.

Laetst thu nat thaet —

How could he forget an Old English standby like the word for *enemy*? Maybe he could use "Dane." But what if these were Norwegians? He paged through *Battle of Maldon* in the dim firelight. The poet was equally unclear. Here he called them *latbe giestas*, "loathed strangers." Well, if it was good enough for an epic, it was good enough for Mr. Leroux.

Good grief — he suddenly realized he was about to be *in* the very poem he was using as his principal source of information. Was that even logically possible? Could it affect what happened tomorrow? And might the *Maldon* poet himself be there? What a coup it would be to meet him. But how could you recognize a poet who was anonymous?

And what if they did change the outcome? Could the Anglo-Saxon genius be inspired to the same heights by victory as by tragedy and defeat? Mr. Leroux glanced at Dreorig. Probably not. But worst of all, what if tomorrow's rewriting of history got the poet-to-be killed? Might Mr. Leroux be responsible for uncreating one of the greatest poems in Old English literature?

In the meantime, Dither was watching Dreorig give another of his German Shepherd yawns.

"Late enough for you?" Dither whispered to him. He began to hum Brahms's *Lullaby*. Dreorig's chin began to settle on his chest.

"Lullaby, and good night," Dither sang. "Paralinguistics," he whispered to Mr. Leroux. "That's the ticket."

Muffled snores began to find their way through the thatch of Dreorig's mustache.

"Finished?" Dither hissed to Mr. Leroux.

"Well, it's not exactly King Alfred's translation of Boethius, but —"

Dither grabbed the fragile sheet and slapped it onto the projector's glass-topped base and hefted the projector up to his waist. "Hold a log under the condensers," he grunted.

Mr. Dither picked one from the pile.

"With *fire* on it. Light, remember?"

Mr. Leroux gingerly plucked from the fire the least dangerous log he

could find and held it as he was told. Thick black tongues of smoke streamed up from beneath the projector, obscuring Dither entirely as the feeble beam of recorded history's first fire-powered overhead projector stabbed through the night. It found a tree trunk.

"Agh, hack, hack," coughed Dither's voice out of the pillar of cloud. "How am I doing?"

"Cold, very cold."

"Which — hack-hack — way, then?"

"Left."

The beam shuddered through the dark until its dim square of light struck the striped side of the tent like a South Bend drive-in movie screen from outer space. A long, finger-roasting silence followed.

"*Halig God!*" bellowed a muffled voice from inside the tent.

"We're communicating!" Dither exulted. Pause. "You know, I've been thinking."

"Thinking what?" The flames were inching up the log toward Mr. Leroux's fingers.

"How old that transparency stuff must be."

"How old is it?"

"It's — hack, hack — acetate."

"Oh?" said Mr. Leroux. "What does that mean?"

"Acetate's highly flammable."

BLAM! went the bottom of the projector, and a great fireball shot into the air.

5.

Mr. Leroux found himself sitting several feet from where he'd been standing, looking into the starburst of embers and charred logs where — ringed by fire like a slumbering Brunhild or, perhaps, a Christmas turkey — lay the smoking remains of — "Dither?" he asked.

No answer. He looked again. Thank goodness — the arm reaching stiffly skyward wasn't. It was a lens. The blasted overhead projector.

But where was Dither?

Meantime, soldiers were pouring out of the darkness on all sides, awkward with sleep and fear. More hurried from the tent.

Dreorig staggered into the circle behind a guard black with soot. "What new witchery is this?"

"Wicca?" cried someone. "Where?"

"No witch could have done that!" said another. "It was a fiend from hell!"

"That's them wlt h the black faces!" shouted a third, pointing at Mr. Leroux and the soot-faced guard. A knife glinted in his hand. "Kill them!"

"Stop!" cried the black-faced guard. "He be halig!"

Holy? Mr. Leroux appreciated the sentiment, but —

"Hie sint fro thaet selcuthe sterre," the guard went on, pointing at the remains of the overhead projector. "*Of him comen i gastliche scinen!*"

"From a strange star that shed a

ghastly light?" said Mr. Leroux. "Dear me, nothing so extraordinary. You see, I was just minding my own business back in the twentieth century — or rather forward, if you see what I mean, and —"

"How would you know?" someone shouted to the guard. "We could hear you snoring all the way over there!"

"The star cast a sleeping spell over me as deep as Jacob's," the guard answered. "An *sterre* with *anne sperre*!"

A star with a spear? Hmm, perhaps one of those Saxon kennings — a metaphor in riddle form, like saying "swan-road" when you mean ocean, or "fowl's-joy" for a quill pen. What could a star with a spear be?

"*Tbaet is ibate a Latin cometa?*" called a voice.

"Thank you," said Mr. Leroux, turning to find a distinguished old gentleman in a heavy, rich robe, the sort who'd be an ornament to any faculty dining hall. He was from the tent.

"I saw them fly past, two of them," agreed the second soldier. "See where my hair is singed!" He was wearing Dither's gray running shoes.

"Think you this has to do with the letters of fire on my tent?" The speaker was also from the tent, a broad-shouldered man of forty-five or so, handsome and self-assured. Clearly this was Bryhtnoth, ealdorman of Essex and commander of Aethelraed's army. He seemed young for an elder-

man, but all that historians knew about him came from *The Battle of Maldon*, and you couldn't expect historical accuracy from poetry.

"You have seen the same fiery letters that Holy Writ tells us King Belshazzar saw, my Lord," the counselor continued.

Letters of fire, thought Mr. Leroux. Wouldn't Dither be proud? But where *was* Dither?

"Do they likewise foretell the end of our kingdom, wise Wistan, good-in-council?" asked Byrhtnoth.

"As Belshazzar needed aid to unravel the meaning of those words, so you must find a Daniel to do the same," said Wistan.

"You, for instance?" said a young thane, hardly older than one of Mr. Leroux's freshmen.

"Quiet, Hrothfut," said Byrhtnoth. "But the words Belshazzar saw were murky — '*Mene, mene, tekel, uphar-sin.*' What I saw was plain as your face — 'Don't let the loathed strangers cross the *stream-sielm.*' Has any of you seen one?"

"The kind the sea-monster leaves behind when he dives beneath the whale-road?" asked Hrothfut with a derisive laugh. "In a pasture?"

"If God can make a fish big enough to swallow Jonah," began a priest who'd been looking on, "he can make —"

Suddenly Mr. Leroux remembered. *Stream-wielm* didn't mean stream. It meant —

"— a whirlpool in a pasture."

"I tried to explain to my colleague it wasn't like dropping down to the commons for luncheon with Le Cercle Français to brush up on your conversational French," Mr. Leroux said. "Old English is a dead language. I mean, it will be. No offense, of course. Present company excepted. Has anyone seen him, by the way?"

Dreorig gave him a warning look from the last scene of *Hamlet* and shook his head. Polonius, Ophelia, Gertrude, Laertes, Claudius, Hamlet, and Dither — all dead as nits. Mr. Leroux bit his lip.

"Consider what the Blessed Augustin teaches," said Wistan, turning back to Byrhtnoth, "how each word of Holy Writ has meanings literal, tropological, analogical, and allegorical. So must each of these words be glossed cunningly to be properly understood. Thus by 'whirlpool' we must understand 'the sharp battle-storm.'"

The man was a born academician, thought Mr. Leroux.

"And is this creature the loathed stranger?" asked Byrhtnoth, gesturing toward Mr. Leroux.

Wistan considered for several fateful moments. "No, this man is but one, and 'loathed strangers' must signify many — the sea-warriors from the ships. We must hold fast so that they may not pass through the whirlpool of battle."

"Again Wistan shows he cares more to gather up power at court

than to be brave in battle," cried Hrothfut. He wants us to wait like old ladies. The true warrior goes stabbing and hacking boldly, or the battle-glory will fall into the hands of strangers and the song-of-victory be on the lips of their women. Better we all lie cold upon the slaughter-beds."

"What do you know about that, still green from the monastery?" said Wistan. "Your sword has yet to drink the wine of battle."

"I cannot help it that the monks raised me," retorted Hrothfut. "I know what path the hero must follow as well as the Danish housecarls my lord keeps about him." This last with a vague gesture toward Byrhtnoth's blue-eyed guards nearby. "And I know from the monks a fiend sent on a ship of brimstone to help Wistan mislead us when I see one. And I say — burn him!"

"Dear me," said Mr. Leroux.

Everyone looked at him again.

"If this messenger were from the Cunning One," said Wistan, "would he not be beautiful and wise to ensnare us the more easily? Only the Holy Shaper would test us with a grinning dolt."

Mr. Leroux wiped the nervous smile from his face.

Byrhtnoth shook his head. "I need some sign to be sure."

"A second comet, and you want more?" said Wistan. "Were not April's calfless cows and eggless hens sign enough?"

This set off a warning in the back of Mr. Leroux's head, but before he could pursue it, the priest with the hawk nose and glittering eyes beneath thick brows began waving his arms.

"Burn them," he cried. "Burn them all."

"I am but a ceorl, hlavord," said Dreorig, bobbing deferentially, "yet I, too, read and write, and I know he is not from no comet. I captured him myself not six hours ago with another, dressed uncouthly like him but human as you or I."

"You lie," snapped Hrothfut, drawing his fist back.

"Benefit of clergy," said Dreorig, cringing and making hasty crosses in the air. "I lived with monks, too!"

"For shame," said the priest. "Spare him."

"Hold!" ordered Byrhtnoth. "I can't have my thanes divided on the even of a battle." He looked from Mr. Leroux to Dreorig to his thanes and housecarls. "This has brought us far from the true question. Do we attack or hold fast?"

"The fiery words say to hold," answered Wistan.

"The hard land road from your traitor brother has left our men too weary to withstand attack after attack by an enemy fresh from his sea-stallions," said Hrothfut. "We should strike while our little strength remains."

"The untried warrior forgets all the general fyrd, my lord," said Wistan.

"They are from these parts, fat and well rested."

"And raw and uncunning in the bitter war-storm," said Hrothfut.

"No more raw than you, clapper-tongue," said Wistan.

"Worthless farmers with the dung still on their feet. See that one has no boots at all, only pitiful slippers of gray cloth."

"In battle he wins who has the largest measure of men," said Wistan. "And keeps them."

"Your raed seems best," said Byrhtnoth. "We hold."

"Then grant me leave to join the fyrd," said Hrothfut, face red. "They are ceorlas, but at least they will see sword-glee tomorrow. Let me prove my name and be the Wrathful-Foot that walks upon the faces of the dead! Little cause shall have the slain to rejoice!"

"Go," said Byrhtnoth. "And take the soot-faced one and his champion with you."

"But my lord," said Mr. Leroux, desperate to stay out of the fighting.

Byrhtnoth turned expectantly toward him, and all at once Mr. Leroux realized he wouldn't be safer behind the lines after all. And much as he might prefer to save the life of this good earl, the wisest course was to keep hands off, to stay as far away as possible so the decisions that would make history as he knew it, could be made again, unhindered. Even entrusting his fate to Hrothfut, that way

offered his best chance. And if he minded his own business and was very, very quiet, maybe the battle would pass him by and at dusk tomorrow he could sneak back to the cliff and find Dither's wormhole.

"Your pardon, lord," he said. "It was nothing."

"There is something about you," said Byrhtnoth, eyeing him. "I would talk with you if the fate of the kingdom did not call me. Perhaps after the battle — if we are both still on-live."

"As you wish, my lord," Mr. Leroux said.

"Tarry no longer!" roared Hrothfut, giving Mr. Leroux a shove.

"Just see you don't burn him," warned Byrhtnoth. "If I hear you did, the value of his wergild is a whole cow."

"A whole cow," breathed Dreorig to Mr. Leroux. "Would I were valued so highly."

6.

Don't count your enemies before they're slain," said Hrothfut with a meaningful glance over his shoulder at Mr. Leroux as he and the hawk-eyed priest led the way.

Mr. Leroux did a little hop-skip to keep up with Dreorig. "You're sure Dither is dead?" he whispered.

"I saw such a thunderclap only once before, when the brothers' old sow hid beneath a tree at the edge of the wood. When the smoke was gone,

the tree was kindling and sausages hung from neighboring boughs for miles around. You must be very powerful."

"I?"

"I saw you casting spells over the fire. Brother Ecgbert could curdle milk and charm wens away with duckweed —"

"Actually, warts are a viral infection, and the body eventually develops an immunity to them, though my grandmother thought they came from not washing thorough —"

"— but his witchery was nothing to yours."

"I'm not a witch!"

"Then how do you explain the way you fell out of the sky?"

Mr. Leroux stopped dead in his tracks.

"The witch is balking," said the priest.

"Get along!" ordered Hrothfut.

Mr. Leroux got along. "You saw us arrive?" he asked softly.

"And hid myself in the woods till I saw how you, too, feared the sea-men, but I kept these things to myself lest Hrothfut and his priest throw you in the fire."

Mr. Leroux's knees buckled at how close he'd come. "Thank you, thank you. There's no way I can ever repay you."

"Yes, there is."

"Oh?"

"I am sworn never to shed blood, but you could cast me a spell so I be

found on-live tomorrow night after the battle."

"I can't."

"Didn't I save your life? You know, scratch my arse —"

"I mean I don't have the power."

"That's what all witches say when you want something worthwhile. Make a neighbor's cow swell up, find a thimble your woman lost, brew a love potion — nothing to it. But ask them for something useful, and all you hear about are the limits of their powers. All right, at least witch me a treasure to buy back the favor of the demon monks so if I live I can sleep in dry straw again."

"I'll try to think of something," said Mr. Leroux.

They trudged on through smells of leather and metal acrid with sweat, through wisps of eye-watering smoke from campfires of green branches and wet leaves. White eyes glinted up at them wonderingly over crusts of bread. Here and there, priests moving from group to group to hear confession paused to watch the little procession, and on every side the whippers scurried like field mice — There he is, yes, him, the one who calls down lightning. No, they say a leass-ceawear. A demon.

"Tell us what you are!" called one.

"A lecturer in early medieval history."

"Woe is me."

"But I'm up for promotion."

"He's a sky-skimmer from a comet!"

"You say this comet was last April?" Mr. Leroux asked Dreorig.

"At spring planting, yes."

"That's what I was afraid of. This might not be the Battle of Maldon."

"What, master?"

"Nothing, nothing." Whoever knew what a battle would be called before it was fought? Mr. Leroux thought. Sometimes they couldn't even decide afterward. Look at Antietam. Southerners still said Sharpsburg. But no question, the comet had to be Halley's. And Mr. Leroux knew too well one April visit it had made — in 1066. It had been recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for that year and even sewn into the Bayeux tapestry as a portent that William the Conqueror would defeat King Harold. Could Dither's computer have sent them not just to the wrong place but the wrong century? "What year is this?"

"Surely that in which fell the day the good old king was both alive and dead, and our new king first sat on the throne," answered Dreorig. "And the poor man's lot as woeful as ever."

If you want a historical question answered, thought Mr. Leroux, never ask a participant. He'd forgotten that people counted by years of a king's reign, not centuries. Then in a flash the answer came to him. Halley's comet traveled in an orbit that brought it back on a predictable schedule every — how many? Seventy-

six years! Now, how much was 76 from 1066 and the Battle of Hastings?

Mr. Leroux had always hated math, especially when people put him on the spot by asking what 6 from 21, 10 plus 5, 14 plus 1, and the name of a vegetable were to see if he'd say carrot. But he plunged into this one and promptly got lost borrowing 1 from 10 to make the second 6 a 16 so he could subtract 9 from it, so he came out with 12 the first time and 990 the second, but allowing a few months' latitude one way or the other and the change from the Gregorian calendar, it was close enough — 991. Everything was all right.

If all right meant being stuck a thousand years before you were born on the eve of a battle your side was about to lose.

Hrothfut halted at a campfire where what had been farmers a few days ago huddled in the circle of yellow light. They sprang up, bowing and tugging their forelocks, reeking of years of stale sweat and that unforgettable smell of October nights Mr. Leroux remembered clinging to his clothes when he came in from play and his grandmother would put down the obituary page and wrap him in a blanket by the electric heater and make him Ovaltine and tell him if he stayed out that late next time, she might not be able to save him.

Hrothfut ignored these demonstrations of loyalty and drew his priest to one side. Dreorig made friends by ex-

changing the Anglo-Saxon equivalent of his grandmother's obit page with someone. Mr. Leroux seated himself wearily beside a man named Wulf. He was no more than nineteen, with a pale, puffy face and thick, strong arms. He wore a cotte of coarse weave under a surplice of two pieces of gray fur tied around the middle with a thong. Mr. Leroux had never seen such pelts outside the "Frozen North" diorama at the natural science museum, but in some atavistic cranny of his brain he knew them at once as wolves' hides. Wulfs lower legs were wound with ropes of twisted straw, and he wore squares of leather tied up around the ankles for shoes.

Crouched in the shadows next to him was a boy too young for war, hood up against the deepening cold, thong-wrapped legs and bare feet tucked under him, cape pulled just over the knees as far as it would go. Two buck teeth rested on his soft lower lip like a rabbit's. Aelfwine was his name, and so close did he keep to Wulf that Mr. Leroux took them for brothers.

"Good health have you?" asked Mr. Leroux with a quick little smile, the way he might have inquired after the health of the counterboy just that morning a thousand years later.

"The sea wolves burned my farm when they came ashore," said Wulf glumly. "My hlavord said I must join the fyrd or be hanged and the ravens peck my eyes out."

Aelfwine shivered.

"The winds freeze the shoes to the feet, cousin," agreed Dreorig.

"Things could be worse, I suppose," Mr. Leroux said.

"Then the king's men ate my cow and sheep," said Wulf.

"*Deo gratias*," said a fat priest with shining skin as he hurried past to to join a cluster of holy fathers that seemed to be gathering around Hrothfut.

Mr. Leroux looked around the campfire. What anonymous fates would the morning bring for these people? He pulled out his copy of *Maldon* to flip through it, but he'd find there no more about these ceorlas and peasants than in the bloodless abstractions of the history texts he'd lived by. Art and history had always been for, and about, the better sort of people.

"Is that writing, master?" asked Dreorig.

Mr. Leroux tried to cover the page with his hand. Though it said nothing about Dreorig's fate, it said more than enough about Byrhtnoth, and Mr. Leroux didn't want to risk changing history any more than he already had. But Dreorig eagerly tugged his hand away.

"No gilded capitals or illuminations, but look at how thin the parchment is, how small and fine the script! And so like one letter is to another, even the *f*'s, which were ever the hardest. Trust an old book-man; this is

worth a fortune. But what tongue is it writ in?" He was looking at the translation side of the dual-language text.

"The alphabet must look strange," said Mr. Leroux. "You're used to the Insular hand with all those thorns and edhs, and this is eight-point Bodoni, but it's Angle-isc, the kind spoken . . . well, somewhere else."

Dreorig squinted at the left-hand page. "*Baersst bordes laerig*," he read, painfully slowly, "*and seo byrne sang* — it is Englisc!"

"That small type could hurt your eyes," said Mr. Leroux, covering the page again.

"Turnip?" said Aelfwine, trying to refloat what had become a boring conversation. He held out a dirt-encrusted purple bulb.

Mr. Leroux declined. He hated raw turnip worse than his grandmother's cooked turnip. And if there was one thing he hated worse than —

"There's late leeks, too," said Wulf.

"What would Brother Cnut say of such a wunder?" Dreorig muttered.

"You must stand to be deemed," Hrothfut's voiced boomed out of nowhere. He advanced until the firelight fell full upon him, red-faced and terrible before his phalanx of priests. "I have told these holy men all. Some say burn you, some not."

Mr. Leroux felt betrayed by these semi-colleagues in learning, as though he'd been called before a faculty disciplinary committee. "But weren't you warned —"

"What is a cow-price to a warrior?" Hrothfut pushed against his temples with his fists. "But this yessing and noing makes my head to hurt."

"Then let me settle it for you," quavered Mr. Leroux. "I am not a fiend."

"You must be!" said Hrothfut.

"And you have every right to that opinion, which I, for one, would willingly defend to the death," Mr. Leroux said enthusiastically. "If it came to that, I mean."

"Let him prove he's not a demon," said Dreorig.

"How can you get enough oath-helpers from his hundred to swear truth is in him, when he's a stranger?" said the fierce-eyed priest.

"I have an army that will swear he's lying," said Hrothfut.

"Did you ever wonder," said Mr. Leroux, "that years and years from now, people might come to find a system of jurisprudence based on factual evidence rather than sworn assertions enormously more persuasive?"

"There is another way," said the fat priest. "As for every known liar. And simple enough."

"Oh good," said Mr. Leroux.

"The threefold trial by ordeal."

"Eep."

"But there isn't a body of cold water around here big enough to see if he floats when he's tied hand and foot," said the hawk-eyed priest.

"And no time for the second or

third ordeals," agreed the second priest. "The law gives three full days for the wounds to heal and prove you true."

"Wounds?"

"After you have carried the red-hot iron bare-handed and plucked the stone from the boiling water."

"We're sorry not to provide you the benefits of due process," apologized a squirrel-like little priest with a face covered by boils.

"What about the ordeal of the cross?" asked Dreorig.

"The cross, the cross!" chorused the others.

Mr. Leroux remembered this one. He and Hrothfut would have to stand with their arms outstretched in the form of a cross, and the first to drop his arms was lying. "What are you trying to do to me?" he whispered to Dreorig.

"It was the safest thing I could think of," he answered.

Meantime, Hrothfut was stripping off his sword belt and ring-mail byrnie, strong and stouthearted, valiant in the sight of many. "Are you afraid, demon?"

"There's no other way, master," said Dreorig as he maneuvered Mr. Leroux next to Hrothfut, massaging his shoulders like a trainer prepping a fighter in his corner. Then Hrothfut puffed out his chest and threw back his arms like the crucifix above the altar of a wealthy suburban church, all triumph and no suffering. It was

Mr. Leroux's first close-up exposure to Dr. Arnold's muscular Christianity. Dreorig grabbed Mr. Leroux's arms and extended them the same way.

"Do not expect an easy victory, demon," said Hrothfut. "Little cause will you have to rejoice as the fire reaches your toes!"

Mr. Leroux found the ordeal bearable enough for the first minute. So this was what a coat rack felt like? It was like the calisthenics the coaches had all been so fond of when he was a schoolboy. He was even a little elated by the idea of how they must look, chests out, heads and arms back, like two airplanes tethered by their tails straining to soar away.

"Like the hero-Christ mounting the Rood," said a priest, admiring Hrothfut.

Then Mr. Leroux's arms began to grow heavier and heavier. The law of gravity sang to him with a siren voice of rest and surcease, and Mr. Leroux felt the temptation of Odysseus tied to the mast. His arms grew heavier still.

"He is weakening," smiled Hrothfut.

"Have heart, master," whispered Dreorig. "I used to do this all the time."

The song turned shrill, strident, demanding. Lead weights were sprouting at the tips of Mr. Leroux's fingers. Invisible sledgehammers were slung from his wrists, and anvils from his forearms. He gritted his teeth.

"At least when you're done, the demon-monks probably won't also flay your buttocks raw," Dreorig said. "By the way, can I just take the book from your leggings now, just in case? I'd hate to see it burned."

Mr. Leroux swallowed and struggled to keep his arms out, but red-hot pins had been driven into his shoulders, and his arms began to shake. He couldn't last long against a prime physical specimen like Hrothfut. He looked like the varsity football squad before the first game of the season, in the pink of condition. That was it! Sure, he had all the advantages of a varsity player. But he had the disadvantages, too. He didn't have Mr. Leroux's advanced degrees. He didn't have Mr. Leroux's guile.

"Soon you will see what I am full of," said Hrothfut.

"I already have a pretty good idea." Through clenched teeth.

"Truth. And it will protect me through the battle."

"And look!" gasped Mr. Leroux suddenly. "They've started it without you!"

"The attack?" cried Hrothfut, leaping forward. "Which way?"

"Hrothfut is deemed the liar!" said the little priest. "The stranger is mortal."

Hrothfut froze in mid-stride. On every side, the bent-backed men of the fyrd looked blankly at him.

"Why are you sitting there?" He shouted, kicking one of the men in the

circle; but when the man did nothing, Hrothfut looked around. "Where is the enemy?"

Mr. Leroux rubbed his lower arms to restore the circulation as Dreorig massaged his back. Round and match to the historian in the blue jumpsuit.

"You tricked me, demon?" cried Hrothfut, kicking aside his byrnie with a sharp *chink* to get at his sword.

"Don't harm him, master," cried Aelfwine.

Hrothfut pushed him to one side, sending him sprawling. Aelfwine's hood fell back, revealing long auburn hair tied back with a hempen headband.

"A wench," Hrothfut said. He pulled her up by the wrist, holding her face inches from his. Mr. Leroux could see the muscles of his jaw working.

"Sacrilege," said the hawk-eyed priest. "Warriors must stay chaste before the battle."

Hrothfut threw her back to the ground. Wulf was by her in an instant, glaring up at him from beneath his mop of hair as he brushed the dirt from Aelfwine's cheek. Bright blood filled the line between her lips.

"Look not at me with wolf's eyes, ceorl," Hrothfut said.

"Keep still, Wulf," whispered Aelfwine. "Woe is him that against-says when a hlavord speaks."

"What are you doing here, woman?" demanded the hawk-eyed priest.

Suddenly the dusty rooster catapulted itself to the end of its tether,

dropped back, flapped its wings, and crowed. A horn, more wooden and fruity than Mr. Leroux had anticipated, cut the darkness from the opposite hillside. Nearer horns answered. The terrible morning was breaking.

"It is time for battle, priest," said Hrothfut. He looked from Aelfwine to Wulf. "See you pay what is owed."

The camp came alive. Men hurried in the gray light to the crest of the hill. Here and there Mr. Leroux saw a seasoned veteran with scars across his knuckles, boar-decorated helmet battered and fastened with a thong under his chin, jerkin of leather studded with plates and rivets, looking quietly into the darkness. But most were young and frightened, with crude pitchforks of sharpened tree-bough, axes of stone tied with thongs to handles of forked wood, leather slingshots. He felt ashamed for the old fears of crowds, heights, open spaces and closed.

"You are man and wife?" Mr. Leroux asked. Aelfwine nodded, her hair once again hidden under her hood. Aelfwine, he thought, Elf's-Joy. "But why are you not home?"

"I told you, they burned our cottage," Aelfwine said, pointing in the direction of the enemy camp. "After Wulf was called to the fyrd."

"They would have burned her in it if I had not snuck back and taken her with me."

"Or worse," sympathized Mr. Leroux.

"What is worse than burning?" asked Aelfwine.

"No, I meant — never mind." Mr. Leroux fell in with the others as they trudged up the hill.

"Move, swine," cried Hrothfut.

"You are young and feel things too deep," said Dreorig. "Let the world pass. *Lif is laene, eal scacath, leobt ond lif samod.*"

Life is a loan, all fails, light and life together. Mr. Leroux drew comfort from the familiar words of *Beowulf*.

Just as they reached the line of men at the top of the ridge, the sun crested the hills to their left in a blaze of orange, slatted the valley, and sliced across the top of the high ground opposite, where a black swarm was taking shape under banners of red and white. The enemy had become terribly real.

Mr. Leroux leafed through his *Mal-don*, looked up to see if he could spot Offa's kinsman letting his beloved hawk fly to the woods to free his hand for battle, but he saw only the dusty rooster stuffed into a sack. He looked for Eadric shouldering his spear to keep his vow to fight before his lord, but he saw only the lines of peasants with their pitchforks and hoes.

There was a bustle behind, jingling of harness, and Byrhtnoth rode by, accompanied by Wistan and his retainers. Above them floated the great yellow dragon banner.

"Hold yur shields before you," he was calling. "Be firm with your spear. Fame does not come to the fainthearted."

At last, something from the poem. *Then Byrhtnoth began to put his men in order, rode among them and advised them, taught his warriors how they should stand, and bid them hold their shields right, fast in their hands, and fear not.*

Byrhtnoth reined in his mount when he came abreast of Mr. Leroux as though he would have said something. Mr. Leroux was more aware than ever how real and final all this was. In moments, swords would cut into real muscle and sinew, real eyes would glaze and foreheads grow earth-cold. And one would be this man.

"Have courage," he said to Mr. Leroux with a smile. "*Wyrð oft nereth unfaenge eorl, þonne his ellen deað.*"

Fate sometimes spares the man who hasn't already been doomed, when his courage is strong. *Beowulf* again. These people certainly liked quoting things. It was what Dither would have called negative thinking, but to Mr. Leroux it seemed find and noble.

"No!" he cried.

"What?" said Byrhtnoth.

"Nothing, my lord," he said, but what he thought was no again. He couldn't explain it, but the desire welled up in him stronger and stronger. Even if it meant resigning his holy

obligations to the past, he would do it. He would save this man. He would change history.

7.

Horns called and answered. The light streaked golden across the green hillside, burnished bright brass helmet and byrnie stud, shield boss and bridle bell. A blue haze rose from the dewy grass, and in the distance Mr. Leroux could see the red and yellow of the trees brilliant in the October morning like shaggy schoolboy heads nodding in thoughtlessness. He thought wistfully of his own classroom.

"Dear, dear me," he said.

He had a better sense of geography now it was light. They were on the highest of several rolling hills, their flanks protected by gullies. In the low ground before them, a little brook widened into a looking-glass, nothing like the *Maldon* poet's mighty River Pant, for the Vikings could simply follow the cart road around it. Had his arrival affected the location of the battle?

Despite his efforts, Mr. Leroux had been propelled by the press of bodies into the front rank along the top of the hill. He'd never been any good at estimating numbers, and he suspected that police and reporters simply made them up when they estimated crowds at abortion rallies and equal-rights marches. Still, there had

to be thousands on every side ranked ten or twelve deep behind him, far more than he'd imagined at Maldon. This could provide the makings of a splendid little monograph, and he tried to note the details.

Those beside him were armed with huge double-headed axes on five-foot handles and carried heavy round shields of wood and leather; each inset with a large iron boss at the center that formed the handhold inside. The famous Saxon shield-wall. Occasional priests still moved behind them, whispering comfort, when all at once cries and whispers rustled along the line.

The enemy, helmets gleaming like the backs of Japanese beetles, moved in three divisions down the hill. The foot soldiers were armed with bows as well as swords and spears, and over their backs were strapped long, kitelike shields. What Mr. Leroux found surprising, however, was that a good half of them were mounted and carried spears from which fluttered bright little pennons. Even the rank-est beginner in history knew that Vikings fought on foot.

He tried to check *Maldon* to be sure, but someone blundered into him and another page tore, leaving him with a top page that had been several pages in, like a rock face of dinosaur fossils suddenly exposed. Still, the text was clear: the Saxon eorlas sent their horses off at the beginning of Maldon, and the Vikings

were explicitly described on foot. Another first for his monograph. This was going to be one publication that wouldn't have to be set in type by Dutchmen. This might even mean the Pulitzer.

On and on they came, massing by the looking-glass of backed-up stream as though to give their doomed a last reflection of themselves in life. It was such a depressing thought that Mr. Leroux feared he was getting like Dreorig.

Trumpets called again from the valley. The foot soldiers began to advance. Mr. Leroux felt uneasy. The poem said a herald had to taunt them so Byrhtnoth could gallantly let them cross. Where was he?

"Fear not, master," said a voice. It was Dreorig. He'd gotten a shield somewhere, and he extended it to cover Mr. Leroux. Wulf was close behind with Aelfwine, her face drawn and white. He carried a pitchfork, she nothing.

"Though I suppose you have made a magic shell around yourself to ward off spears."

"I told you —"

"I know, I know. But you don't mind if I stay close anyway?"

Farther along the line, Mr. Leroux could see the great dragon standard sucking in and billowing out in the morning breeze. Beneath it were Byrhtnoth's fierce blond housecarls, and in their midst on horseback sat Byrhtnoth himself, one hand holding

the reins of his mount, the other resting easily on his hip. In the sky above him soared great dark birds in wide circles.

*Tha waes feobte neah,
tir aet getobte.*

*Was seo tid cumen
thaet thaer faege menn
feallan sculdon.*

*Thaer wearth bream abafen,
braefnas wundon,
earn aeses georn.*

Waes on eorþan ciern

Then was the fight near, glory at battle. The time was come when the doomed men should fall. Shouts were lifted up, ravens circled, the eagle eager for carrion. On earth there were cries.

"The beasts of battle," Dreorig said. "What is a soldier but flesh for the joy of the raven? The eagle waits for us to make an end, and the gray wolf, who will slink among the dead when night has fallen to eat his fill."

Mr. Leroux thought of the crow on his gutter and shivered. Eating Mr. Leroux's grass seed was one thing. Eating Mr. Leroux was another.

More shouts. A flight of arrows broke loose and arced up the hill, raining down on the heads of the defenders. Instinctively, Mr. Leroux tugged at his umbrella, but Dreorig raised his shield to cover Mr. Leroux faster. A sharp *thok* — unfamiliar but unmistakable. Mr. Leroux didn't have to

look to see that an arrow itself in the lindenwood above his head.

Another *thok*, hollower and softer. Mr. Leroux knew that sound as well, though he'd never heard it either. Barely able to breathe, he turned his head just enough to see a man behind sagging between the shoulders of Wulf and another. An arrow jutted incongruously from the middle of his chest like a coat peg, the red stain spreading up the shaft-wood. His eyes stared into the middle distance, his mouth working as though reciting some silent catechism. Then the thread of spittle that hung from a corner of his mouth went red and his eyes rolled back into his head. Yet so tightly was he wedged between his companions that he still stood.

Another rain of arrows, another. Those with bows tried to retaliate, but they were too few to have any effect on the mass pushing up the hillside behind kite-shaped shields. Up, up, up they labored, breaking at last into a jingling, armor-heavy trot the last few yards.

They were close enough to Mr. Leroux to make out their faces now, dark eyes glittering from the shadows beneath the iron straps that hung from their helmets over their noses, shoulders broad in what looked like leather overcoats reaching almost to the knee, studded with broad-headed rivets, luckier ones in coats made entirely of interlocking rings of iron.

What had Dither been thinking

of? A battle was like a Conrail freight. You couldn't change its direction any more than you could go down to the switchyards and stop a locomotive by stepping in front of it with your hands up. There was no way he could save Byrhtnoth.

"*Dex aide!*" cried the Vikings through the swirls of dust as they pounded closer. "*Dex aide!*"

What in the world did that mean?

"*Ut, ut!*" answered the Saxons. "Out, out!"

And then the collision, shield driven against shield, shoulder against shoulder, great swords and long-handled axes heaved high into the air. The line staggered back, then surged forward.

A heavy wooden shield slammed against Mr. Leroux and knocked him into the soldier behind him. Without thinking, he swatted back with his umbrella, bouncing it harmlessly off the conical helmet of his attacker as the man drew back his sword arm. Mr. Leroux shriveled into himself, wondering whether it would be like being cut or cudgeled, how long it would take, and how much of it he would find uncomfortable, when Wulf drove his pitchfork into the chest of the Viking.

More shouts of "*Dex aide*" and "Out," billows of choking dust, and then distant trumpets. The pressure seemed to lessen, like a storm wind gradually falling. The fierce Vikings took one step back, another, then

broke and ran down the hill.

Far to the side, a peasant ran forward, waving for his comrades to pursue the defeated enemy, a ridiculous scarecrow, all arms and legs, barefoot and dressed in tatters. Some of the soldiers began to laugh, and even Mr. Leroux had trouble holding back a smile, but at the same time he admired the poor fellow's courage. And there was something compellingly familiar about — no, it couldn't be!

An arrow *thwapped* into the ground next to the man, and he turned to discover no one had followed him. The soldiers laughed harder, but then the Viking horns drew all eyes downhill, where mounting knights were pushing the retreating foot soldiers aside as they spurred their horses forward.

The peasant hesitated a moment, considered the advancing cavalry, and began to scramble up the hill like a cartoon character who has just realized he's run off the cliff and is trying to keep from falling. At the same instant, one of the riders urged his horse ahead of the rest, charging up the hill after the man to the cheers and laughter of his comrades. He reined up when it was clear the Saxon was going to make it back to the safety of the shield-wall, stood in his stirrups, and saluted the man by throwing his spear into the air and catching it. Then he threw his sword in a bright flash, caught that, too, to show he could have had the Saxon if

he'd wanted, shouted to those behind, and lashed his war-horse furiously up the incline. His fellows cheered and broke into a gallop behind him, spear pennons cracking and snapping.

So he was the Viking herald. Mr. Leroux checked his text. Again no mention of a horse, but in a minute he'd say something like, "You must send quickly ransom for protection, because it is better for you to buy off our spear-attack with money."

The knight, however, said nothing. He charged into the Saxon center near where Byrhtnoth watched from among his housecarls. Mr. Leroux saw him flailing with his sword as his maddened horse reared and plunged, and then he was pulled down into the maelstrom of axes. So noble a man, even if he hadn't taunted a single soul. And such a shame to lose that part of the poem. But it suggested the course of events might have been subtly changed by Mr. Leroux's arrival. Perhaps there was even hope for Byrhtnoth.

The main body of mounted Vikings continued up the hill after their lost herald, hungry for revenge. For a moment, Mr. Leroux forgot himself and felt the tingle of exhilaration at the coming collision. What was the phrase? The sharp battle-storm. Yes, like thunderheads rolling in across an open field, the smell of fresh ozone, the electricity tingling in the hairs on the back of your neck.

The shock of the Viking horseman

slamming into the shield-wall shivered the length of the line. Monstrous shapes loomed through the dust, hacking with swords, shouting like madmen; great horses bucking and whinnying, eyes rolling; the clear, clean, spine-curling ring and shriek of metal scraped across metal.

Mr. Leroux held up his text as though it were a shield. "*Baerst bordes laerig*," he cried out, "*and seo byrne sang gryre-leotba sum*." *The shield's rim broke, and the war-shirt sang the song of terror.*

"So, you are a scop!" cried Hrothfut, appearing out of nowhere. "No wonder I took you for a demon! Why didn't you tell me?" He began hacking fiercely at the ribs of a chestnut mare. "Then see what I do, that you may weave my deeds into your song." The horse staggered, the huge armored rider lost his balance, and Hrothfut's ax brought him down like a great tree. "And I will live forever."

High in the air the black birds circled eagerly.

A new horseman was upon them, and swung his five-foot mace at Mr. Leroux.

"Harm not my scop!" cried Hrothfut, and shoved the nearest thing he could find at the mace-wielder. Wulf. Aelfwine screamed, and Wulf, caught off-balance, was turned sideways. The mace shattered his skull from behind. His head bounced violently to one side, his face frozen in a newborn's look of astonishment and incompre-

hension at seeing the world for the first time, and he slipped under.

Mr. Leroux swung his umbrella with both hands. The horse reared, and the massive face broke into a startling white-toothed grin, when suddenly the eyes bulged, the body went rigid and rocked in the saddle, then sagged and dropped like a bag of dirty socks toppling off a laundromat table. Dreorig stepped back, one tine of Wulf's pitchfork broken and the other red and wet with blood. He looked at Mr. Leroux, the betrayal clear on his face.

"I have broken my oath," he said.

"Watch this!" called Hrothfut as he drove forward.

But Mr. Leroux turned to find Wulf. On every side the dead were dragged between the shoulders of the living, but somehow there was an eye in the storm where Wulf lay on his back in the muck of trampled grass and mud. His chest was sunken, and the coarse cloth of his tunic beginning to pool with blood. His face, so like any of Mr. Leroux's students, was white, even the boyish blemishes blanched a sickly purple, and the eyes stared up blankly at the circling crows.

*Stood fast in struggle,
warriors fell,
wearied by wounds,
Slept among the slain.*

And Aelfwine? Gone.

Through the clack and clatter of arrows on helmets and shields, the horns called out. To their right the Vikings were retreating again like a wave sucking back, horses cantering and swirling in disarray as the fyrdmen pursued them down the slope with cheers of "Out! Out!"

A shudder of anticipation ran through the men beside Mr. Leroux, and with new fervor they shoved and pushed and hacked to join their fellows. Then, out of the confusion below, an unhorsed knight pulled a comrade out of the saddle and vaulted up onto the back of the horse. He called to the men streaming past, but when they refused to stop, he stood in his stirrups and yanked off his helmet.

An ordinary enough head, slightly bald in front so it glinted like a helmet top in the westering sunlight, shaved up the back of the skull level with the ears, massive shoulders and arms, and a protruding little belly not altogether unlike Mr. Leroux's own.

The effect was electric. Shouts lapped against shouts, and the mass of men and horses thickened, slowed, and solidified.

What a shame, Mr. Leroux thought, that this chieftain wasn't named in the poem. Maybe Dreorig could have the scribes at Winchester insert it afterward. Or Mr. Leroux could put it in the monograph.

Meanwhile, the leader firmed his men and rolled them back against the

disordered Saxons. They tried to flee up the hill, but the Viking chief was everywhere, shouting, striking, and in moments the last of the fyrdmen had been lost in the dust and horsemen. Mr. Leroux shook his head. Even he could see the difference between the battle-hardened Vikings and the raw Saxon militiamen.

Again the horns, again the sweep of horsemen up the hill, again the twisting in the intestines and the trembling of the legs before the shock, again the crash and clatter, dust and screams and whinnies. And so it went, hour upon hour, the line of struggle swaying sometimes forward, sometimes back. Fatigue burned between Mr. Leroux's shoulder blades. He feared time might have gotten muddled and was repeating itself in some kind of loop; the battle might wear on forever, Wulf springing back to life to fight and die again. And then, with cries of "Out! Out!" the Saxon line trembled and bulged as the Vikings fell back.

"What are you waiting for, ceorlas?" urged Hrothfut, whom the currents of battle had again cast up nearby. "Even swine covet glory!" He glanced significantly at Mr. Leroux to be sure his heroic encouragements had been noted.

At that moment, as suddenly as the Viking chieftain had appeared among his retreating men, just off the end of Mr. Leroux's nose appeared a tanker plane in search of a B-52. A

black- and yellow-striped tanker.

A wasp.

How in the world a wasp had found its way into a battle in the middle of October was impossible to fathom. Yet there it hovered among the flashing swords and flailing spears, readying its stinger.

And if there was one thing Mr. Leroux hated more than crowds, heights, closed spaces, open spaces, getting lockjaw, choking to death in a restaurant, policemen in comp lit, swelling up like a blowfish, and jogging, it was being stung on the nose.

The wasp wanted the rose in his lapel. He'd forgotten all about it from a thousand years later, but there it was, only a little wilted, just peeking over his jumpsuit collar. He tugged at it, but a thorn caught on the underside to make it as hard to get out of the buttonhole as it had been to get in. He tried to back away from the wasp as he pulled, but the fyrdmen packed in on all sides left him nowhere to go. The wasp glinted as it looped up and banked into a dive with a high-pitched *zizzz* like a Stuka after a Russian truck convoy. Mr. Leroux popped out of the line like a bar of wet soap.

"See the eager-for-glory stride fearlessly into the fray!" cried Hrothfut after him. "Wait for me! Follow, sons of dirt, that we, too, may find the slaughter-couch of fame!"

Mr. Leroux, pelting just ahead of the wasp eager-for-noses, was too pre-

occupied to notice the line breaking loose like old wallpaper and unfolding itself down the hill after him. He was thinking instead how everyone except his grandmother had always told him if you stood still, a wasp wouldn't bother you. So as he neared the deadly confusion at the bottom, he put on the brakes, and the wasp shot past and disappeared in a sharp upward corkscrew. Mr. Leroux swallowed bravely.

"Out!" cried the Saxons, thundering down after him.

"Ouch!" cried Mr. Leroux, as a horrid, pulsing pain struck his nose and radiated across his forehead and along his jaw. His eyes teared, and star bursts went off behind his eyelids.

"*Dex aide!*" cried the Vikings.

"That's not Norse!" cried Mr. Leroux, as though the stinger had drilled a way into something buried in his memory. "It's French!" And with that he recognized the helmetless chieftain who reappeared out of nowhere to spring his trap, turning his fleeing warriors and loosing the horsemen he'd hidden in the groves on either side. A flight of arrows swarmed over Mr. Leroux's head toward the remaining Saxons on the ridge.

The instant froze. Even the arrows seemed to slow, drifting lazily up the slope.

Mr. Leroux knew what he would see, and tried not to, but he couldn't resist. On the ridge were clustered the housecarls beneath the dragon

standard — not of Essex, of course, hut of royal Wessex. And calming his frightened mount was not Byrhtnoth, hut the king. And there the fated arrow found his right eye, and he fell.

A fierce smile burned on Hrothfut's face as he swung his ax at the enemy closing in on all sides. "Sing they may take my lord," he cried to Mr. Leroux, "but no man shall say I went lordless home." He drew back his ax again. "Watch th —!"

An unexpected broadsword doubled him over, broke the chain links of his byrnie, broke the bone-locks of his body, and he, too, tumbled to earth.

Damn Dither, damn his computer, and damn his dreams. Through eyes stinging with tears, Mr. Leroux turned from where lay Harold Cyning to where rode the William whom Mr. Leroux's mad charge had made the conqueror.

8.

A wolf howled — not the romantic wail of a hundred Western movies Mr. Leroux's grandmother hadn't let him see, but the howl of a creature so driven by need it would risk skulking among the living men it feared and hated to reach the dead it hungered for. Mr. Leroux, huddled with the rest of the prisoners, thought of Wulf, food for his namesake, and clipped and unclipped the snap on his collapsible umbrella strap. Hrothfut dead,

Harold, even Aelfwine.

Alas, *ubi sunt*?

And Dreorig. Leroux hadn't seen him since he himself had been cornered by a Norman cowherd fiercely crying, *Se ceder, vache!*" and prodded him with a dagger through the margin of struggle into this quiet backwater of the wounded and captured. Now he had no way to get back to the cliff, even if he knew what to expect when he got there. He'd spend the rest of his life trapped in the wrong century, without antacids, without disinfectants, without —

Without Dither. The reality of his loss was sinking in, and he realized how he missed him. He'd had the kind of nobility that faith can confer even upon misadventure. Mr. Leroux had never thought about it before, but he realized that beneath all his communications, Dither had been a romantic. That was what lay at the heart of his grape boycotts and peace marches and power-mower petitions. And when that overhead projector had blown, he'd died the death of a romantic, like Byron succumbing to fever as he battled to free Greece, or Shelley going down at sea.

He tried to hold hack the tear forming at the edge of his left eye. Poor, poor —

"World-class facilitator," Dither's voice said out of nowhere, "is what I'm talking. Hey, Leroux, glad you're O.K.!"

"Dither!"

"Yeah?"

"It's really you!"

"Yeah, right."

"But you're alive! Why weren't you blowd up by that projector?" Mr. Leroux found he sounded like the counterboy.

"Good question," Dither said. "All I remember is waking up under the wrong end of a horse. They made me carry hay and treated me like an idiot — me, the primo communicator. Then they sent me up front where all the arrows and stuff were. Nice mess you made, leading everyone into that trap."

"You were the wud that wadded to attack," Mr. Leroux said. "Was that you wavigg for everybody to follow you this mordigg?"

"I was trying to set up lines of communication."

"Adyway, I was stugg by a waps," Mr. Leroux said glumly. He tried to focus on his enlarged nose, but his eyes kept crossing and he was afraid they'd freeze like that. His grandmother had always said so, anyway. But then, she'd also told him he would turn red, swell up like a blowfish, and die if he got stung, and he hadn't died at all.

Had the old woman been a psychopath?

"Guess I blamed everything on the wrong WASPs," Dither mused, peering into his megawatch. "Anyway, we've got two hours, sixteen minutes to undo the damage you did and get

back to the cliff or be stuck here for good. Because I don't mind telling you, our window of opportunity's closing faster than a triple-track storm when you're trying to push up the screen."

"*Abi! culvert, mauvais hom de put aire,*" shouted one of the guards. His spear butt caught Dither smartly in the back. "Silence!"

They were. But the groans of the wounded began to filter from the darkness, and Mr. Leroux struggled to think about anything beside the wolves. He listened to the muttering of the guards. What a poor excuse for French, as though they were biting into Aelfwine's turnips. *Caval* for horse instead of *cheval*, indeed.

A particularly haughty-looking knight in a stained leather jerkin had just reined in his horse and was surveying the prisoners disdainfully. Like all the rest of the aristocracy, he looked like a piano-mover. He wore no beard, but a gernon, two long circles of hair grown from the mustache on his upper lip that framed his mouth and jaw. Another rider pulled up looking even brawnier — the broad-shouldered, pot-bellied man who'd rallied his troops that afternoon by taking off his helmet.

"Williab the Codqueror," said Mr. Leroux to Dither.

"Him?" asked Dither. "Maybe if I could persuade him to give up and go back to France —"

"Are you crazy?"

"There's no limit to what a skilled communicator can do."

"Why don't you just fall in love with somebody else? There *are* young ladies who don't require a gentleman to change the course of history in return for their affections, you know."

But Dither wasn't listening. He had that look in his eye again. "All this time I was thinking we had to change the dynamics of Anglo-Saxon culture. That was dumb!"

"Yes," agreed Mr. Leroux.

"Because if the Normans are going to be in charge, then it's *them* we've got to change! We'll raise *their* consciousness, you know? I'll set up encounter groups, peer discussion groups, group-therapy groups, groups groups, make them totally comfortable sharing their feelings —"

"Dither, this is the Middle Ages. Nobody was ever comfortable. They didn't even have central heating."

"And committees to handle all inequities before they get institutionalized," Dither went on. "They can learn to self-police any o-pression, repression, or suh-pression, and set up quotas so the Anglo-Saxons are equally represented in the construction industry, like oh, I don't know — churches, castles, and, well, whatever Normans build."

"Dudgeods."

"And I'm not talking about token Saxons, I mean real jobs for serfs *and* serfettes. White-collar and administrative, too. Can you translate that

for me?"

"Doe."

"I took a B.S. so I wouldn't need a language, and all I had in high school was a couple weeks of Spanish before I switched into this great horror movie course, but unlike you, I'm not afraid to try."

He strode to Duke William and his companion, and halted at the duke's stirrup. "*Est usted la employer Action Affirmatif?*"

A score of men-at-arms threw themselves on the dangerous Dither and wrestled him to the ground like the Secret Service.

"Please don't hurt him," Mr. Leroux ventured.

The duke leaned back slightly to study Mr. Leroux. "What name have you?" he asked.

"Leroux."

The duke tipped his head, then his lips split in a broad smile. He leaned over and knocked the helmet off the skull of the guard next to him like a bottlecap, revealing a full head of red hair.

"*Le roux, aussi!*" he bellowed, and threw his head back with a laugh like a tugboat lost in fog. It was the funniest thing he'd heard since he'd slit the noses and cut off the ears of the burghers of Alençon.

Mr. Leroux looked glum. Though he'd sometimes ruminated over the fact his name might be French, he'd never come to terms with the possibility he might be descended from a

redheaded Norman. And now he was face-to-face with a brute who might be his own grandfather nine hundred years removed. He looked at the gaps between the yellowed fangs, the white scar that ran from one cheek up the side of his nose like a ski trail across Mount Snow, one pale blue dead eye and one glittering and live.

"You don't have any male children, I hope?" Mr. Leroux asked.

"*Le roux, aussi!*" foghorned William in case anyone had missed it. He was interrupted by a commotion from the darkness, and several more soldiers stumbled forward, thrusting their prisoners into the firelight before them.

"*Regardez la bonne chance!*" exulted one, yanking back the prisoner's hood.

"Aelfwine!" Mr. Leroux gasped.

She stared steadfastly at the ground.

"*Une fille!*" cried the Ur-Leroux.

"Aelfwine?" said Mr. Leroux again.

This time she turned a dry-eyed face toward him, brushing the auburn braid away with the back of her hand. Somehow her broad face and rabbit teeth made her seem more vulnerable. The redhead pulled her face around by the hair.

"Stop that!" Mr. Leroux croaked, surprising even himself.

"Liege," protested the redheaded guard. "She's ours!"

"She saw her husband killed today," Mr. Leroux said.

Duke William's smile faded. He looked from the guard to Aelfwine, distantly, as though he were thinking of the tanner's daughter of Falaise his father had taken at the edge of the pond where he'd found her washing clothes.

"Take the rest of England," the duke said, straightening in his saddle. "Leave her to grief."

The redheaded guard bowed reluctantly, with a sideways glance at Aelfwine.

"Truly I will prophesy," Mr. Leroux said in the best French he could muster, "frob this day will you be called Williab the Codquoror."

The duke smiled. "Anything is better than William the Bastard." He signaled the guards to let Dither up, then turned his horse's head and rode back into history.

Mr. Leroux accepted a skin of water from a fellow prisoner and passed it to Aelfwine. She drank, and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. There was a strength in her he found strangely attractive. He looked past her to the red of the western sky. Today's sun had set on more than a day. The world had lost something strange and wonderful. For all his bluster, Hrothfut had a raw Germanic courage the world would not see again; and for all his gloominess, Dreorig had deeper insights than most.

He felt a need to mark this passing of an age. His poetic instincts in Old English were not up to the occasion,

but he did have what was left of his *Maldon*. He drew it out. The first words of the surviving top page read ". . . brocen wurde," *broken were*. How right. He cleared his throat, and by the flickering firelight, he began to read — no, to chant — in a still, small voice:

. . . *brocen wurde*.

*Het tha byssa hwone
bors forlaetan.*

"A scop!" whispered a prisoner. "A weaver of words!"

Mr. Leroux blushed. He wasn't a true scop, a shaper, only a reciter of another's lines, but the rest drew round for the comfort of the familiar cadences.

"Perfect, guy," whispered Dither. "Keep them happy while I think of something."

Someone somewhere had a harp, and struck solemn chords to the four stresses of each line. One-two three-four, one-two three-four. How the young warriors were ordered off of their horses and sent them away, how Offa's kinsman loosed his hawk and Eadric swore his oath, how the Viking herald taunted and Byrhtnoth let them cross, how Aelfnoth and Wulfmaer fell. Tears glistened in the eyes on every side as Mr. Leroux held up to their defeat the mirror of another seventy-five years ago. He came to the last page, how the old retainer Byrhtwold urged his men to fight on even though they knew they must lose.

. . .

*Hyge sceal thy heardra,
beorte thy cenre
mod sceal thy mare,
thy ure maegen lytlath.*

Resolve shall be the firmer, heart the keener, courage the more, as our strength dwindles.

There was a scrap more about Godric throwing his spear into the advancing enemy, but the lump in Mr. Leroux's throat was too big to go on.

"*Thaet waes god sang*," said Aelfwine.

Mr. Leroux looked into her broad face, deeply flattered.

"True worth is not to fight when hope is high," said a listener, "but to endure when hope is gone."

Mr. Leroux tried to wipe the pearl of mucus the October chill had coalesced at the end of his nose, and felt a twinge of pain. He remembered that close-up glimpse of the wasp. What nasty faces the dumb brutes had. There was probably nothing so frightening as an insect face. It touched some atavistic fear deep in the human mind. He shoved his hands into his coveralls pocket and felt something.

Good grief. Once you started having heroic ideas, it was habit-forming.

The redhead emerged from the darkness, face twisted in a hungry smile.

"You know something, guy," Dither said, "for once, I'm stumped. We

could be stuck here for good. I might never see the Other again."

"Sorrow not, wise warrior," Mr. Leroux whispered, quoting *Beowulf*. "The worse things get, the stronger we must be. Help Aelfwine when I say it's time." He turned away so the guard wouldn't see him reaching into his pocket, but the guard was too preoccupied with Aelfwine to notice.

"Come, woman," he said.

"EXCUSE ME?" piped Mr. Leroux, hopping between them.

The guard found himself looking into the goggle eyes of a grasshopper-headed fiend pointing a black stick at him.

"Beelzebub!" he cried.

The black stick popped open like a blowfish, and the guard toppled backward over a leg thrust out by a Saxon and into the fire.

"Now, Dither!" Mr. Leroux shouted, skipping over the prostrate redhead.

The strange procession scampered through the dark — the lanky Dither, the Saxon woman with her cape of burlap and braids flapping behind her, and Mr. Leroux in his jumpsuit and gas mask, umbrella high over his head, pursued by a man in a smoldering cape. Then came a second installment, more men in clinking mail shirts, waving swords and torches and shouting curses in bad French.

The glowing redhead began to gain on them, intent on Mr. Leroux. He was going to destroy him. The

closest Mr. Leroux had ever been to such raw Darwinian competitiveness had been in Dither's car with a brand-new Saab at their rear bumper. Yet they managed to shake him off and lose themselves among the oxen and farm carts of the duke's supply train.

"It's Malle!" cried Aelfwine, stopping.

"A friend?" said Mr. Leroux.

"Our cow!" A large beast tethered to the wheel of a wagon laden with barrels gazed calmly at them.

"Will you come on?" Dither demanded.

Mr. Leroux helped her untie it. "Can you think of a better disguise?" he said. "We'll look like we're moving supplies for the army."

"But you're going the wrong direction," Dither said, pressing the illumination button so he could see his megawatch's built-in digital compass. "The sea's that way."

"It would have been if this were Maldon," said Mr. Leroux. "But here it leads back to the camp. Follow Aelfwine. She knows the area."

Mr. Leroux did not feel anywhere nearly as brave as he sounded, however; every footfall was an agony of suspense. Yet somehow they passed through the disorder behind the army and into the quiet darkness to the south. The half-moon rolled high in the sky, keeping pace and spilling just enough light to see the path. A wolf howled far behind them.

At last the fields opened and the

groves of trees began to look like the ones Mr. Leroux remembered hiding in the day before. Suddenly shouts behind them. There he was again, the helmetless Ur-Leroux, possible progenitor of Leroux's yet unborn down to Mr. Leroux himself, running for all he was worth. He was waving a monstrous broadsword, furiously oblivious to the ruddy flames his running had fanned to life on the back of his cape. There might have been enough time to reach the trees if Malle hadn't noticed a clump of late clover on the way. Aelfwine tugged at the halter, but though Malle's head lowered and her neck stretched, her four feet refused to budge. Mr. Leroux grabbed the rope to help.

"Die!" cried the fireball, drawing close enough to swing his broadsword.

Mr. Leroux just ducked and thrust back with his umbrella. It was another of those instants when everything slowed, and Mr. Leroux could calculate each angle and velocity. The point of his umbrella was going to strike the soft part of the Ur-Leroux's neck and kill him. And then? If this man were really his forebear, would Mr. Leroux uncreate himself? Would he feel pain as his umbrella plunged into his ancestor's neck? Or would he simply wink out like a star gone dark?

And did he have it in him to harm any human being?

He never found out. Just before his umbrella tip struck, there was an-

other of those shoulder-scrunching, eye-squinting cracks of a skull being smashed, and his umbrella speared empty air. The red-topped head simply wasn't there.

Dreorig was instead, a bloodied length of tree branch in his hand. At his feet lay the Norman, stone-dead, the fire on his cape guttering.

"You're sure you're not a witch?" Dreorig asked.

"He fell in a campfire back there," said Mr. Leroux. "How did you get here?"

"Anyone who can hide from Brother Cnut and his willow switch when the fit is on him can outwit a few drunken Normans. Are you hale?"

Mr. Leroux patted himself all over. He hadn't vaporized. He felt his nose last of all. Still there, still swollen, but not as bad as it had been. So he'd been right so long ago when he'd told Dither no single action could change history.

Unless, of course, the man hadn't been his ancestor after all.

"Come on, come on," Dither said. He pressed a pinhead, and a green glow streamed up from his megawatch like light from a quart of bad oysters. "We're almost out of time!"

Mr. Leroux clapped his hand over the watch. "Do you want them to see us? Dreorig, help Aelfwine get us to the ridge where you found us."

"To make more magic?"

"To go home."

"Oh, well," Dreorig shrugged. "I

suppose we're as likely to be killed if we stay here."

Farther on they tethered the cow amongst the branches in one of the groves before toiling the final stretch up the ridge. At last they stood, their faces cold in the hard sea wind, the white surf magically bright where the moonlight caught it snaking along the back of the black water. Dreorig pointed silently to the clusters of soldiers moving among the beached ships below.

"How will we recognize an empty hole in the dark?" whispered Mr. Leroux.

"Look for the laser grid," answered Dither. "The computer's programmed to turn it on to mark the mouth of the steam tunnel when the wormhole reappears."

Mr. Leroux looked. "I don't see anything."

"That's because we need fire."

"Won't that attract attention?"

"It'll also create a refraction media so we can see the beam," Dither said. "That's what the Other did to get us out of Rome. Got a match?"

Mr. Leroux didn't because he didn't approve of smoking, but as it happened, Dither had a cigarette lighter of clear plastic with a trout fly and hook embedded in it. Dreorig began to get suspicious when he was sent to gather papery handfuls of leaves. When he returned, Dither knelt and spun the flint sparklessly at them.

"You'd better go," said Mr. Leroux. "They'll see the fire if we can ever *start* one." He felt his pockets and found the tattered remnants of *The Battle of Maldon*. "Here," he said, handing it to Dreorig.

"So great a gift?" Dreorig protested.

"Use it to buy back your place with the monks," said Mr. Leroux. "I can always get another."

"Yes, I could beg the demon-monks to copy one for you."

"No, no, it's missing the front and back pages. If it ever got into circulation, it would wreak havoc with textual scholarship."

Dreorig looked puzzled.

"And you, Aelfwine," said Mr. Leroux. He wrestled the rose from his lapel and handed it to her. "Dante will do better by Beatrice with a rose of white and red, but think of this as an Allhallows autumn rose."

"When two people know each other," she said, "they call each other 'thou.'"

"Thou, yes," he said, blushing and fumbling in his pocket. "For thee, also." He handed her the aureus.

Her eyes widened at the sight of the gold.

"It would tear my pocket out if I wore it back, but with thee it would buy a new beginning. I only wish it could also buy thee justice."

"Life is not just," she said. "It is borrowed."

"Got it!" cried Dither as the thin-

nest thread of smoke curled up from the bright spot of the lighter's flame.

"Run!" said Mr. Leroux.

"About the warts," said Dreorig, lingering to see what would happen. "I forget the charm, but the secret is duckweed. Rub it on and they go away."

The flame widened rapidly and the smoke grew thicker. No wormhole appeared.

"It's got to be somewhere," Dither said. "The Other's never wrong."

"You're sure that watch of yours is right?"

"Of course it is." Dither's face was worried in the firelight. "One minute left. If we miss it and have to recalculate without the Other's micro — oh, why didn't I bring one of those battery lap jobs?"

The smoke rose in a nearly invisible column into the black sky. There were shouts from behind them and from the beach below. A crowd of horsemen appeared just down the slope from them. All at once there was a twist in the wind, and the smoke dipped down below the level of the cliff.

And then it appeared — long interlocking pencils of red light marking their pathway to the present. Ten feet below the lip of the cliff.

Mr. Leroux swallowed. If there was one thing he hated worse than crowds . . . it was heights. The horsemen thundered up the hill.

"This way," Aelfwine said. "I can hide thee."

"My way is here."

"To jump? That's no way."

"Get her clear," Mr. Leroux called to Dreorig. "There could be another lightning bolt."

"I knew it, I knew it!" Dreorig said, grabbing Aelfwine's arm. "Witches all along. Hurry, child! I saw what the last one did." He pulled Aelfwine into the dark. She gave Mr. Leroux one last look and was gone.

Mr. Leroux unsheathed his umbrella and locked arms with Dither as the horsemen closed in.

"What if we miss?" Dither said unhappily.

A kite-shaped shield swatted him on the head like a rolled-up newspaper just as Mr. Leroux resolutely popped his trusty umbrella open and pulled Dither into the void.

Down they plunged as Mr. Leroux tried to angle the umbrella so their feet would drop just inside the rim of the wormhole. He miscalculated, being new at it, but just as he and Dither were in the process of plunging past on the wrong side to their deaths below, the wind swung back and swished them into the gaping bowl of the rift in the space-time continuum, where their momentum swirled them round and round and down into the plumbing of the centuries.

9.

They don't stand up to stress very well," observed Mr. Leroux as he in-

spected what was left of his third-best umbrella. It looked like the skeleton of a pterodactyl that had come to grief. They had been back since yesterday, and Mr. Leroux was still nursing the bruises he'd gotten tumbling back into the steam tunnel. Still, he'd already shampooed the carpet three times where Donalbain had come *that* close to exploding. He had also discovered his lawn had been reduced to a parched square of seedless dirt by the beasts of battle.

All right, crows.

"Saved our necks, though," Dither observed. "Otherwise we'd have been dead at the bottom of that cliff for the past nine hundred plus years. Matter of fact, you did some pretty quick thinking back then. For a historian."

"Thank you." Mr. Leroux straightened his tie, thinking of Aelfwine. No rose today. The bush looked more tattered than his umbrella; even the beetles had moved on. Just as well. This jacket probably didn't have a button-hole either. "And have you seen the Other?"

Dither shook his head like old Dreorig.

"Well," said Mr. Leroux kindly, "why don't we walk a bit?" It was breakfast time, and he would buy Dither a croissant and coffee at the New Athenian Bookstore coffee bar.

They walked in silence, Dither's eyes fixed on the pavement just in front of his feet.

"I did call her," he said at last.

"She said when she tried to run a new time warpage analysis, the computer booted Chopper Attack, and she claimed there were dents all over the CPU."

"Astonishing."

"And Washington's blaming her because the FBI claims two guys broke into the lab and were squashed in some high-gravity accident. They're still looking for the remains."

"Dear me," said Mr. Leroux.

"So she said if she ever saw me again, it would be too soon. And if I didn't resign from every committee we were on together, she'd ask an old friend from the Weather Underground to plant a bomb in my VCR."

"She'll get over it," said Mr. Leroux.

They passed the policeman with his foot on somebody's bumper, writing out a ticket. "See you in class," he said to Dither.

Dither smiled tragically. "Hope so," he said weakly.

"'Cause I'm really breaking new ground," the officer said. "I've established that the wolf is an entirely self-referential figure."

"In Old English poetry?" asked Mr. Leroux.

"In *The Three Little Pigs*. No one's ever done a deconstructionist reading of it before."

"If only we'd changed *something*," Dither said as they walked on.

"But if we had, how would the Other have known? We'd have come

back to a present where those changes were the way things had always been. But I still say when you're close to the forces of history, they're too vast to comprehend, let alone change. You can't just give Napoleon antacid. The Imperial Guard wouldn't let you get close enough. Matter of fact, even to have a chance, you'd have to go back years before Waterloo, get to know him on the way up —"

"Wait a minute!" Dither cried. "That's it! Oh, I'll have her eating out of my hand in no time. Of course, I'll still respect her as a person."

"Why don't you just come in and have a pure Colombian coffee and a flaky croissant?"

"Haven't got time," Dither said. "But that's the ticket to saving it — time, I mean. I just need to get there *early* enough, while the slate's still clean." He turned down the street, then stopped. "By the way, who's our local expert on the Big Bang?"

"Dither, I —"

"Never mind, the Other will know. Later, guy!" And he was off, long legs pumping. At least, Mr. Leroux sighed, Dither was his old self. He pulled the door open and entered.

The same wild-haired refugees from madhouses were huddled in the religion and philosophy sections at the back shelves, and the same waitress was having the same argument with the counterboy. Neither looked up as he approached the counter, and if there was one thing Mr. Leroux

hated worse than — Oh feathers, what was the point? He turned aside as though he'd really come in just to browse, and found he was next to the Leopold Classics shelf. Same train panoramas and Luftwaffe memorabilia on either side, same unsold copy of the *Battle of Maldon*. Maybe he'd buy it to replace the one he gave Dreorig. He slipped it out of the shelf and turned to the first page.

... *brocen wurde*.

Where was the beginning? This text started exactly where his damaged copy had. He glanced at the footnote.

"From the transcript made 1724 by John Elphinston of the eleventh-century manuscript, Cotton Otho A. xii, burned in 1731, apparently copied from a faulty or otherwise incomplete MS of earlier provenance, perhaps the anonymous author's own holograph. Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson B. 203, pp. 7-12."

The manuscript of *Maldon* that the scribe should have copied was lost — perhaps the poem the demon-monks had entrusted to Dreorig — and the tattered Leopold Classic he'd given Dreorig later had been copied in its place. So he'd changed history after all. Only a manuscript, a literary artifact, but still *something*!

He backed into the counter.

"Would you watch it?" the waitress said. "According to Leibnitz," she continued, "time can't exist independently of events."

"Custobers," the counterboy snorted with disgust.

Mr. Leroux slammed the copy of *Maldon* down on the counter. The lunatics at the back shelves jumped. "I am just back from a long trip," he thundered. "I want a cup of fresh Colombian coffee with two creams, I want a flaky croissant, and I want them *now*. Or soon will you lie on

the slaughter-beds of glory with little cause to rejoice."

They stared for a moment. Then the counterboy began to wipe the counter in front of Mr. Leroux. The waitress began to pour his coffee.

"Tell me," he said with satisfaction, opening the book, "have you ever heard Old English poetry read aloud?"



"It says here you dug up Mrs. Clancy's rose bushes, bit Agnes Pendleton on the ankle, knocked over old lady Wagner's porcelain lamp and chewed up Mr. Grebner's slippers. You chased the Fullum's cat and constantly chased squirrels, rabbits and preschoolers. . . ."

Books



**ALGIS
BUDRYS**

Soldier of The Mist, Gene Wolfe, Tor, \$15.95

Critical Terms for Science Fiction and Fantasy, Gary Wolfe, Greenwood, \$35.00

Futuredays, Isaac Asimov, Henry Holt, \$12.95

Speculative fiction is of course moving in some direction, because it is a living, evolving thing. Most new SF is created by persons responding to that motion, like variously energetic creatures of the deep, with diverse tastes in sustenance and in ways of getting at it, but all subject to the tides, which carry them here and there.

Or so it is said of ocean denizens in elementary science books, and certainly there is as much accuracy in that construct as there is in Newtonian physics. But you would think, wouldn't you, that to some extent Leviathan stirs the tides; that the waves would not roll *exactly* as they do if the waters were not perturbed by the reflexes . . . or perhaps even the intentions . . . of some of the hearts that beat within them.

It could not be a large effect, certainly. And almost always, the rush of a school of grouper thence would be cancelled by the opposite surge of barracuda hence, and swept crosswise by the placid flipper-strokes of a sea-turtle thither whilst a predating cayman breasted an estuary yon.

Almost always. But not always. And once the tide has carved even a

tiny bit of shoreline in a way it would not have if the moray and the angel-fish had never been, then forever after the tide will run differently, and carve even farther. Barrier beaches will appear, and soon enough green islands. Elsewhere, shorelines will be undermined, and elegant dwelling places shall topple, in accord with Newton in spite of Newton, and damn the expense.

In our deep, Gene Wolfe trafficks with an imperturbable ferocity that seems placid. I think nowadays he is writing purely for himself (if he ever did otherwise). I think he cannot, will not, respond to visible developments in newsstand speculative fiction. Invisibly, I think he will condition some of those developments, and who knows what will then support flowering and what will topple.

Soldier of The Mist is a historical adventure fantasy set in approximately the fifth century B.C.; its hero moves in peril and doubt across the landscape of a Greece that has not yet heard of Pericles and is fresh from the glorious massacre at Thermopylae. It is locked in combat with Persia, and riven internally by aggravated forms of its customary warfare among the city-states, all of which expresses itself politically with what we today would call Byzantine complexity.

This is the stage on which Latro the soldier — we gradually learn he is a handsome youth of uncommon ath-

letic gifts and great wisdom — reveals himself to us by way of his diary, reported as having been found “behind a collection of Roman lyres in the basement of the British Museum.”

The mist of the title, however, is his chronic amnesia. Found with a fresh head-wound, he does not recall his past and cannot explain his circumstances. It is possible for him to deduce, perhaps accurately, that he was a soldier for the Persians, who are being harrassed now by the Athenians and the Spartans, in the days just before the great Greek naval victory at Salamis.

But he does not have a historical perspective on all this, of course. He doesn’t even have the names. His Greek is not native to him; he calls the Spartans “rope-makers,” and their city “Rope,” because that is how he inaccurately translates the language. By a similar stretch of folk-etymology, he calls Athens “Thought,” and there, according to Wolfe, he is right, but only by a coincidence which Wolfe himself did not discover until after the book was underway. Piraeus is “Tie-up.” The Peloponessus, on which Rope is situated, is “Redface Island,” with “The Silent Country” — Laconia, mis-derived from “laconic” — in the south.

The net effect of this is to remove *Soldier of The Mist* from that historical-epic flavor in which Tony Curtis says: “Yonda is da castle of my fodder.”

Wolfe loves language, as readers of *The Book of The New Sun* discovered if they hadn't already suspected. He loves the things people do with it, and he loves the reasons why they do them. He does them himself with a dedicated poetic sense that is not least among the many reasons why we should cherish him. His use of the mechanics of language-making here is an immediately successful technical device; to call a Spartan a "rope-maker" is to de-mythologize him instantly, make him accessible as a realistic character, and enable Latro to address him as one human being to another, so that neither is a stuffed dummy and both are characterized.

But there is more to it in Wolfe's creation of Latro as a character, for Latro forgets, every day, whatever he learned before. Each day is a new birth, and he must write down the events of every day or lose them forever. He must grope for contexts as he gropes for data; when he converses, or when he receives or gives information, he and his audience frequently talk at cross-purposes, so that Wolfe is able to produce a series of — apparently — artless overtones and *sotto voce* harmonizations which present Latro's narrative not so much in a series of facts as in a skein of intuitions.

This aspect of the story will undoubtedly produce various effects on various sorts of reader. The most felicitous effect, I think, will occur to those who don't know their Greek

history and geography at all well, and who are some years past their last browse through Bullfinch's *Mythology*. I don't think it will matter whether such a reader is able to follow Latro's wanderings exactly, either geographically or historically. They are not, in truth, fully detailed. As in *The Book of The New Sun*, some events are omitted, to be picked up in subsequent volumes, and some may prove to have been mistakenly described by persons with an interest in those descriptions. But in any case, Wolfe uses this, as he uses many other technical devices, to convey the fragmentary nature of Latro's consciousness . . . and of the peculiar milieu of pre-Socratic Greece. It is not a milieu in which facts are immutable or Aristotle comfortable.

The gods, you see . . . the gods intervene. And they take a peculiar interest in Latro, which he cannot always understand when it is manifested to him, which he cannot remember except by consulting the (possibly) accurate notes in his diary, and which again and again strikingly modifies the attitude of those who would be his comrades, his slaves, his masters, his manipulators, beneficiaries, lovers. It is clear he is intended to perform some task relating to divine politics, but not even a fresh recollection of Bullfinch will help you all that much in untangling which aspect of what divinity, demigod, mere immortal, magician or spirit it is that is acting

now. Usually, in Latro's account, they appear casually on the scene, and can only be perceived by him (except if he touches them, or in a few other rare instances in which some or all of his companions participate). Some of them are obviously in on whatever it is that Latro has been set in motion for. Others — like Herakles, who drops in casually on a wrestling bout to coach Latro — appear to have just been passing by when they noted that something interesting was afoot. But perhaps there is some significance in their "dropping by" usually when he is in some danger of being hindered on his course by further injury, or by death.

The Greeks had a word for everything, detecting minute shades of meaning where languages such as ours just lump it all. But that, of course, reflects an ability to detect minute shades of being, minute shades of essence, minute shades of significance, minute aspects of power — that is, to also have a god or godlet for everything, and if not a whole god or goddess, then some aspect of such a personified force.

This is what Wolfe exploits masterfully in a fantasy milieu like no other, because no other had so many centuries dedicated to its rationalization and proliferation by geniuses. What with his inordinate ability to paint word-pictures and construct scenes containing only the relevant facts, Wolfe is able to pull us directly

into Latro's Greece and make it seem easy to do so. And once there, because of Wolfe's sapient technical choices we also enter Latro's mist. Remember he knows even less about Bullfinch and Herodotus than we do; to him, Herakles is just some fellow with a club, whom no one else can see. In Latro's world, there's a lot of that.

This book also does not spare us the terrible beauties depicted in such works as Mary Renault's *The King Must Die*. These were people from another world, with a mythos that did not breed mercy (as Wolfe fully points out in half a sentence). What is wholly Wolfe's own here is the endless charm of seeing this world through Latro's extraordinary eyes and deep but captivated mind. Once again, an artist has found the best that is inherent in SF as it is in no other literature, and those who judge us only by what was and what is are given their response by this production of what will be.

This is a major endeavor by an artist who always pushes beyond where he was; the opening of a fresh universe even before the public has seen the rounding-off of the *New Sun* books. May no idiosyncratic god or draught of lethe stay your swift progress to the store.

Gary Wolfe, now, is a scholar; Dean of Continuing Education at Roosevelt University, author of *The*

Known and The Unknown: The Iconography of Science Fiction, and a fair-sized mover and shaker in organizations of SF-related academe. What he has set out to do this time is provide a handle on SF for academics who up to now have neither known nor expressed much desire to know anything about SF beyond "classical" forms. *Critical Terms For Science Fiction and Fantasy* is an effort to give a name to every detectable shade of substance within what I have come to call "newsstand SF" — that is to say, speculative fiction (science fiction and fantasy) which would almost certainly never have been written were it not for the emergence of mass-market literature.

Mind, this is a larger class than SF written to *be* mass-market literature within some definition where "mass-market" is synonymous with "porridge-like." It is SF written, to whatever standard, as a consequence of exposure to a mass-market SF at any stage of its evolution from the frequently clumsy if appealing stage that lasted into the late 1930s, *undt so weiter*.

In Wolfe's book you will find a rational opening essay on what need this book fills: "On the one hand, concepts from traditional literary discourse often seem inadequate . . . while, on the other, terms coined specifically to describe such literature appear eccentric or esoteric."

Yo. Wolfe goes on to explain that

this is not an encyclopedia — he recommends the Nicholls — nor a glossary of Fanspeak (Wilson Tucker's "Neofan's Guide" is proffered). Wolfe's premise is in fact both modest and sweeping; he offers this book as the first compendium of its special sort, and only the first; a place to start, for those who have been baffled by not having a word for it.

I wonder, ah, just how many such people there be who are prevented from an honest study of our SF *only* for lack of a vocabulary. Most of the ones I've met have a knack for forgetting tomorrow whatever grudging concessions might have been wrung from them today. And as devoted readers of these pages will recall, I in fact wish that some bemused power would lessen the vocabularies of some scholars, not increase them. Still, if nothing else, Wolfe has now called the bluff. And he has codified some useful terms, such as Kathryn Hume's "additive world" — one of three legs in an interesting forensic construct — and Christopher Priest's "concealed environment." Both terms — like many others cited by Wolfe — precisely describe one thing, and one thing only, that is a genuine aspect of SF.

Wolfe is careful to cite sources, and to give an extensive supporting bibliography. His index is weak — it is an "index of Primary Authors," and cannot be used to retrieve references. Priest, and Kathryn Hume, are

neither one of them in it, for instance. I'm not sure what it's for. But while that's a significant shortcoming, the book as a whole is a long step forward. We may now see improvements upon it, or, more likely, evolved variations, just as the Nicholls badly needs one. But it is the rock upon which all such future work will be founded, and only Wolfe will ever experience so much labor in having gotten it up the hill. We owe him one.

What *is* the future? As the nineteenth century rolled toward its close, a French novelty manufacturer commissioned a series of cigarette cards from Jean Marc Cote, a fellow perceived to be an ordinary commercial artist. His assignment was to create a series of novelty scenes depicting events — that is, technological events — in the year 2000, and these would be stuffed into packages of Gauloise, or whatever. But it is amazing what an ordinary commercial artist can achieve. Cote went on to depict such things as air-sea rescue, aerial warfare, pursuit of winged smugglers, and the motor home, as well as submarine buses powered by whales, mass instruction by grinding textbooks into a hopper electrically connected to the class's headphones, wine shops and tobacconists' bob-

bing in the English Channel for the convenience of passing aviators, and fashionable parlors heated by radium.

Due to the death of the publisher, the cards were never released, although they had been printed, and the entire supply — except for a proof set — was water-damaged over the passage of time. But in 1978 Christopher Hyde came across the proof set.

This is now a lovely square-format enamelled-stock paperback, about eight by eight, I would guess, with the cards reproduced in color from that set. They are well worth the browse, and then the closer study. What makes the book, however, is the introduction and running commentary by Isaac Asimov.

If it's true that a picture is worth a thousand words, then Asimov has spent wisely. Charming and eye-catching as Cote's (and Hyde's) work is, Asimov's ability to set everything in perspective, and then comment on its aptness, displays a use of terms, and a setting in context, that raise this book well above the level of novelty. It is, gently and respectfully, made an exhibit for a disquisition on what is and what isn't science, what is and what isn't prediction . . . and what is, and what isn't, the stuff of SF.

A lovely, lovely idea for a book, executed superbly.



Patricia Matthews' short fiction and poetry have appeared in markets ranging from Cosmopolitan to Alfred Hitchcocks Mystery Magazine, and she has published a series of historical novels, most recently TAME THE RESTLESS HEART, from Bantam Books. She lives near San Diego with her husband and says that her first love was science fiction and fantasy.

The Children of the Sea

BY

PATRICIA MATTHEWS

July 1, 1889:

The cliffs of Craddagh are tall and gray. Like fortress walls, they protect the island from the sea, which gnaws and frets at their base, spending its fury in sprays of foam. Atop the cliffs, Glendon House perches like some great gray and white bird, its stone and wood seemingly grown from the cliff. I loved it at first sight.

My sister, Rosanne, of course, hated it. It was, she said, cold and windy, and isolated — no fit place for civilized people; and she was, she declared, going to be miserable there.

We came to Craddagh because of my father's health, which had necessitated his leaving his post at the university. Glendon belonged to Father's cousin, Cedric Glendon, and since Cousin Cedric does not care for the island life, and seldom visits Glendon, he offered the use of it to us.

As I said, I was delighted with the move. I am, I confess, given to solitary pleasures. I read a great deal. I paint, and I write. I am not much given to the company of large crowds of people, and indeed, I know little of how to make myself agreeable in company. Father says that I need to get out and about more, but Mother tells him that I am "bookish" by nature, like her father, and that he should not push me.

If this is true, that I am like her father, then it is the only way in which I am like any member of my family, even one who is dead and gone. Sometimes I have wondered if I am not adopted, or a changeling, perhaps — one of those strange, dark children left on human doorsteps by the elves or goblins.

My father is tall, broad-shouldered, and ruddy, with fair hair and light

hazel eyes. My mother is brown-haired, blue-eyed, and slender. Rosanne inherited the best parts of both, for she is tall, slender, golden-haired, and blue-eyed, with aristocratic features and the assurance that comes with beauty.

I, on the other hand, am short, sturdy, dark-haired and dark-eyed, with a snubbed nose and a short chin. Mother says that I have beautiful eyes, and they are large; but it seems to me that they are far too much so. If Rosanne looks like a goddess, then I look like some little animal, brown and small and sleek.

I spent those early days on the island happily — walking along the cliffs, taking the trails that led down to the sand and the rocks, searching the tide pools, and reading in the shade of the huge boulders. I painted seascapes, wrote poetry, and began a novel.

Father seemed to be enjoying the quiet, and was slowly regaining his strength. There was a housekeeper, hired from the village, who took care of most of the heavy housework, and Mother seemed to be content to tend to the light chores and to sit with Father, reading to him or doing her needlework. It was a peaceful life, and pleasant. And then it all changed, for we met Conrack.

It was going on for winter then. The seas were growing even wilder and rougher, turning from a brilliant blue to a threatening gray. The blue

skies and white clouds of summer were turning also; and often, in the afternoons, a fierce wind would rise, moaning through the low, wind-bent trees, and whistling through the sea grasses to come tearing at the house with cold fingers.

Father, although he was growing stronger, was still not able to do all the things that needed to be done before the winter set in. Storm windows needed to be put up, wood laid in for the fires, such things as that.

It was Mrs. Llewellyn, the housekeeper, who suggested Conrack.

"He's a good lad," she said to Father — I was listening from my chair near the fire in the drawing room — "and strong and willing. His mother, Mrs. Mohr, is a widow, and they need the money. I am sure that you will find him satisfactory."

Mrs. Lewellyn gave my father directions to the widow's house in the village, and Father said that he would go and see the boy that very afternoon. Rosanne, who had been fidgeting about the room, asked if she might go with him.

I was surprised, I admit, for Rosanne usually had only harsh things to say about the small village down by the bay. The villagers were an ignorant lot, she said, and the village itself smelled of fish — as well it might, for it was a fishing village, after all!

Father asked me if I would like to go as well, but I was at an interesting point in the novel I was reading, and

so it was that Rosanne met Conrack before I did. When she and Father returned for dinner, her cheeks were pink and her eyes were bright. I could not help but notice, and Mother, too, looked at her curiously.

"Well, Rosanne," Mother said. "You seem to have brightened considerably. What was there at that village, which you usually find so dull, to put such a glow on your cheeks?"

"Oh Mother!" answered Rosanne, turning pinker still. "It was just the wind. Just getting out of the house."

Mother smiled, for she knew Rosanne as well as I did, and turned to Father. "What is the boy like? Do you think he will do?"

Father helped himself to another piece of roast, and nodded. "He's a strapping lad, much taller and better made than most of the villagers I've seen. Quite attractive, in a rough way, and seemingly bright and willing."

Mother nodded. "Good. I'm pleased that in hiring him, we will be helping the villagers in a small way. They seem to work so hard and yet have so little, and I have always found them gentle and friendly" — this with a reproving glance at Rosanne.

Father shook his head. "I shouldn't rely on their gentleness or their friendliness too much, my dear. Although they appear to be a quiet, well-behaved people, they have some strange ways. I have heard, for instance, that if someone, even one of their own, commits a wrong, or harms

the village or one of its people, the villagers exact a severe punishment."

Three days passed before I met Conrack, and when I did, I was no longer surprised that Rosanne had shown an interest in one of the villagers. Father's description had been modest. Conrack was all that he had said, and more. Although he had the dark hair and skin of the other villagers, he was far taller than most, and so his heavy shoulders and sturdy build were shown in a more favorable aspect. However, it was his face that one noticed most, for although somewhat rough-hewn, it was very handsome; and his eyes, very large and black, seemed to glow with intelligence and understanding.

I came upon him at the rear of the house, where I had gone to retrieve some clothing that Mother had hung on the line to dry. He was chopping wood, the sleeves of his rough blue shirt rolled up above his muscular forearms, and the neck of the shirt open to show the strong brown column of his throat. He stopped his work when he caught sight of me, and smiled, showing perfect, even white teeth.

"Hello," he said in a deep voice. "You must be the other one, Mercy."

Somehow his manner precluded any offense that might have been inherent in the words themselves. I found myself returning his smile. "Yes. I am the other one," I said. "And you must be Conrack."

He nodded, and leaned upon the ax handle. "It's a pleasure to meet you," he said. "I was beginning to think that you did not exist, although your father told me that he had two daughters."

"Well, I am the quiet one," I explained. "Rosanne is the kind of girl that people notice, all bright and shining. I'm like a shadow, small and dark, and who notices a shadow?"

He laughed, throwing back his head. "Another shadow!" he said at last. "Almost all of the islanders are small and dark. A few are tall and dark, like me. Besides, your sister may shine on the surface, but what is underneath? You shine from the inside out, and that is the kind of shine that lasts."

As he said this, he looked deep into my eyes, and I felt my heart lurch, just as they say in novels, and I grew faint. Something that I did not usually permit myself to feel began to rise in me. Was it possible that I had finally met a boy, a man, who would prefer me to Rosanne?

As the days progressed, marching toward winter with chilly certainty, we became friends, good friends; and, despite my hesitations and fears, more than friends. For the first time, I began to know what it might be like to love a man.

Rosanne, at first too bound up in herself to notice anything or anyone else, finally began to become aware that Conrack was spending a great

deal of his time with me, and for the first time in our existence, Rosanne became jealous of *me*! At first, I think, she could not believe that someone, a man, would prefer my company to hers. She continually made excuses to be where Conrack was working, and she flirted with him shamelessly.

When she began her campaign — for a campaign it was — I was again beset by doubts, certain that she was right, that no man in his right mind could resist her; but as time went on, I could see that what Conrack had told me was true. He did not find Rosanne attractive. He was put off by her vanity and superficiality; and I began to accept the fact that he cared for me, for he told me so with words, glances, and touches, until I finally felt loved, and dared to love in return.

How can I describe the wonder of it, the glory, the thrill that ran through me when he touched me, when we kissed? Sometimes we would sit on the rocks overlooking the sea, and he would tell me stories of the island, of the village and its people. They were fisherfolk, he said, and had been for as long as people had lived on the island. A strange people, he admitted, with many stories and legends, but generally kind and peace-loving, with a great feeling for their island and for the sea. His mother belonged to one of the oldest families on the island, but he knew little of his father, who had disappeared at sea when Conrack was but a small boy.

As we talked, we would watch the sea, the soaring gulls, and the seals, cavorting below like clowns, barking and diving, their intelligent, whiskered faces rising from the water, round and sleek.

I thought they were beautiful, and said so, and Conrack smiled. "Do you know what we call them?" he asked. "We call them the Children of the Sea."

I squeezed his strong hand, which was holding mine in its warm grasp. "It seems a reasonable name to me," I said. "They seem far more civilized than some humans I have known."

He laughed and pulled me to him and kissed me upon the brow. "My wise Mercy," he said. "You see so clearly, and that is one of the reasons why I love you."

I felt so good, so at peace and happy. It was a rude shock to hear Rosanne's voice behind us, stiff and cold with anger. "Well!" she said loudly. "I wonder what Father will say when I tell him about this, Mercy?"

Conrack and I both turned, startled out of our warm mood. Rosanne's face was pale, except for her cheeks, which burned red. I could not understand the reason for her great anger. Surely she did not need the admiration of *every* man in the world. Surely she could spare me one. This one.

Rosanne turned and began to run back toward the house. Conrack stood and took me in his arms, holding me fiercely close. His face had grown dark

and set. "I think that whatever she does will not be good," he said slowly. "She is an evil person, Mercy. Evil because, in her vain and shallow preoccupation with herself, she cares for no one else."

I felt tears welling up in my throat and the heavy weight of apprehension in my chest, for I knew he was right. "I'd best go after her," I said, beginning to pull away; but he drew me close again. "Not yet," he said. "I must tell you something first, something important to both of us."

And so it was not until a good half hour later that I returned to the house and found out what my sister had told my parents.

At first I could not believe it. Even Rosanne, selfish and thoughtless as she was, could not be that wicked and cruel. She sat on the blue sofa, her head forward so that her hair covered her face; and well she might hide, I thought, after telling such a cruel lie. The bodice of her dress — which had been whole when she had run away from us on the cliff — was torn away from her shoulders and chest.

Mother was distraught and pale, and Father was flushed with anger and indignation. He was, I could tell, all set to defend his daughter's honor, although she had none.

"Mother! Father! She is lying," I cried finally, after they had told me the story. "Conrack has no feelings toward Rosanne except impatience

that she keeps bothering him!"

Rosanne kept her face hidden, but Mother and Father both looked at me pityingly, as if they thought me too naive and inexperienced to judge such a matter, for it was inconceivable to both of them that any man or boy would not desire Rosanne.

I let my anger take me. They were so blind! "It is the truth!" I said loudly. "Rosanne has thrown herself at Conrack, but he cares nothing for her. It is me he loves, and she cannot stand it. That is why she lies!"

Father and Mother both looked slowly at Rosanne, and then back at me. I could see from their expressions that whatever I might say would be of no use. They were too used to thinking of Rosanne and me in certain ways, and they could not change this pattern now.

"Rosanne!" I cried pleadingly. "Tell them the truth!" But she looked up at me defiantly, and I could see the anger and determination in her eyes.

"It is the truth!" she said coldly. "What reason would I have to lie?"

And that, of course, settled it. For in my parents' eyes, there could be no reason except that it had happened. Conrack had assaulted their beautiful daughter, had attempted to rape her, but she managed to escape him and flee to the house.

It was growing dark, and I could hear the wind building a storm outside of Glendon House's thick walls.

The growing darkness added to my fear and apprehension. My father was usually a reasonable man, but, like the people he had spoken of in the village, he flared into protective anger when someone or something of his was threatened; and once his anger was aroused and he had made up his mind to a course of action, he could not be dissuaded.

"I am going down to the village!" he announced. "That young man will be brought up on charges!"

Mother, her face white, touched his sleeve. "But Warren, it is growing dark. There is a storm coming. And the villagers. . . . You said yourself that they do not take kindly to interference. Surely it can wait until morning."

Father glared at her. "By tomorrow morning he could be well away from the island, or hidden from us. I must go now and bring him back here. In the morning I will send for the authorities on the mainland."

"But what if they, the villagers, do not believe you? What if they will not let you take him?"

Father's face creased in a humorless grin as he opened his gun cabinet and pulled forth an evil-looking pistol. "This will help me convince them of the justice of my act."

I could not suppress a moan of dismay, and even Rosanne seemed to be nonplussed by what she had set in motion.

Father turned and stalked toward

the entryway, and I turned toward Mother. "Whatever you may think," I cried, "Rosanne is lying. I am going after Father, and it will do you no good to try to stop me!"

Mother's face was still pale, but her lips were set. "We will all go. No matter what happened, I do not want your father ruining all of our lives by some rash act committed in anger. Get your coat, Rosanne. I will get a lantern."

Rosanne's eyes showed panic, but she began to do as she was told. Not waiting for Mother and the lantern, I ran to the entryway and pulled a heavy shawl from its hook, and was out the door. Against the lowering sky, I could see Father's figure as he began to make his way down the easier of the two paths that lead to the village below.

My fear made me feel strong and reckless. I ran to the second path, which is much steeper and rockier than the path Father was taking, but also much shorter. My only thought was to reach the village first, so that I might warn Conrack.

The wind was growing in strength, and the sea-damp air penetrated my shawl, adding to the chill that I felt inside. Down and down I went, my purpose lending keenness to my sight and strength to my limbs, until at last I reached the village.

I had never been to the Mohr house, but I remembered the directions that Mrs. Llewellyn had given to

my father, and made my way to the low, simple cottage that clung to a level space above a jumble of huge rocks that stood between it and the roughening sea. There I pounded wildly upon the heavy wooden door.

A short, plump woman with threads of white in her dark hair answered my knock, and without shame or courtesy I thrust myself into the room, pushing the door closed behind me. "Conrack!" I gasped. "I must see Conrack!"

She lifted the lantern she was holding, and looked at me for what seemed a long moment, and then she smiled. "You must be Mercy, then."

"No time." I said. "Conrack. My sister has done something terrible. My father is coming to get Conrack. There is no time to explain."

Mrs. Mohr put her hand upon my arm, and her expression was very calm. Was it possible that she did not realize the seriousness of what I had just said?

And then Conrack came into the room. His expression, too, was calm, and he looked at me with love and tenderness. "It will be all right, Mercy," he said softly. "No matter what appears to happen tonight, remember that I love you, and remember what I told you this afternoon upon the cliffs."

He had no time to say more, for there came a great pounding at the door, and my father's voice crying out Conrack's name. I clung to Con-

rack and tried to keep him from opening the door, but it was no use. He opened the door and faced my father calmly, as water faces the fire. I was beside myself with fear.

Behind my father I could see the pale faces of my mother and sister, and in that moment I hated Rosanne as I have never hated anyone before or since. My father was shouting something, but the wind caught his words and tore them away before my ears could hear them.

My father moved back, away from the door, and Conrack moved toward him, leaving the house. I reached toward Conrack, but his mother, very gently but with great strength, pulled me back, as Conrack moved out into the night.

They stood now clear of the house, on the edge of the rocks, as the wind buffeted and tore at their clothing. I could see that Father was shouting, and that Conrack was answering, but I could hear nothing as I strained against Mrs. Mohr's strong hands. Mother and Rosanne stood a bit to one side, huddled away from the sting of the salt spray that the wind was now flinging at the cottage.

And then I saw Father take out the gun and begin to wave it wildly. At that moment the moon shone briefly between the scudding clouds, and I clearly saw Conrack's face, set and implacable in the cold night.

I am still, to this day, not certain of just what happened in the moment

that followed. I know only that Conrack moved very quickly, so quickly that it seemed he had not moved at all, and yet there he stood, on the edge of the rocks, with Rosanne in the bend of his arm. The next moment they were both gone; and only my mother's agonized scream rose above the roar of the wind and the sea.

Just as quickly as that, it was over. Just as quickly as that were our lives changed forever.

There was nothing to be done, of course. Rosanne's body was found the next day, washed up on the beach below Glendon House, but although the authorities from the mainland came and searched the beaches and coves, no trace of Conrack's body was found.

"But could he still be alive?" my father asked, with red eyes and ragged voice.

Although I cannot find it in my heart to mourn for my sister, I feel very sorry for my parents, for I know what pain they are suffering. They feel they are alone now, for Rosanne was their golden child and she is gone. And me? Oh, they love me, in a certain fashion, and they will protest when I tell them that I do not intend to go with them, back to England; but they spent so much of their love on Rosanne that they never let me get close enough so that they might take comfort from me, so the fact that I will be staying behind will not hurt

them unduly. Besides, I am of age, and they cannot prevent me from following my own course.

I am remaining on Craddagh. I have already sent a wire to Cousin Cedric asking if I may continue to stay at Glendon House as caretaker, and since he does not like to leave the place unoccupied, I am certain he will agree.

My parents will be leaving in a week or so, and when they are gone, my real life will begin. My life with Conrack, for he is coming back, you know. I am as certain of it as I am of life itself, for I remember one of the things he told me that day on the cliffs: water, no matter how rough and violent, can never be the death of one of the Children of the Sea.



"Stop peering into the future."

Barbara Owens ("The Doors," Nov. 1984) often deals with current issues in her writings. In "The Greenhill Gang" she looks at the plight of the elderly. Sometimes, as she shows us, the elderly are not as "helpless" as they may first appear.

The Greenhill Gang

BY

BARBARA OWENS

She couldn't find words for it, but there was something about Jenny Londo that Fran didn't like. It was puzzling. Certainly no one in Greenhill had been more solicitous during Fran's time of grief. Since Phil's death, Jenny, a mere nodding acquaintance before, had dropped by at least three times a week, carrying tasty tidbits to encourage her appetite, bringing community news, sometimes just sitting quietly with her when the emptiness inside grew too heavy for Fran to speak. Not even Fran's closer friends had remained so loyal.

Maybe it was Jenny's appearance. Fran eyed her surreptitiously. She'd never appreciated women who tried to hide their age under layers of youthful skin tones and shockingly colored hair. Perhaps that was it — Jenny's bouncy blonde curls and painted doll's face, with her not a

whisper under sixty-five. Yet many Greenhill women affected a girlish facade, and, though Fran felt pity for their foolish attempts, none produced the sense of inner recoil that Jenny Londo did. Yes, it was puzzling, all right.

"So, what do you say?" Jenny finished in a gush.

Fran had missed it all. That happened so often lately — she went off somewhere and didn't know she was gone until something jolted her back.

"I'm sorry, I wasn't — what was it you —"

"You see?" Jenny's dimples flashed triumphantly. "I rest my case. My dear, you simply must get out of this house. Now, I knew Phil Rawlings slightly, and I don't believe he was a man who'd want you hiding here inside. Honestly, Fran, you're turning all gray and warty."

Fran ventured a weak smile. "Oh well, I—"

"Listen." Jenny scooted close, placing a heavily jeweled hand on her arm. A pungent perfume cloud misted Fran's eyes. "A step at a time, all right? First a little lunch at my place — just you, me, Pru Harris, and Thora White. You know them, don't you?"

A vision of a tall, horsey woman with a stoop drifted behind Fran's eyes. "I think I've met Pru."

"Good! Pru's a kick. We three have a lot of fun together, do all kinds of things. Call ourselves the Greenhill Gang, isn't that too much? Maria Lewis used to be our fourth, but she died." Jenny dismissed the late Maria with an airy wave.

Fran tried to draw her arm away. Something seemed to be busily sinking in her chest. "Oh Jenny, if you're looking for someone permanent, I'm not ready to—"

"Did I say that?" Jenny's smile teased. "I'm talking about a little lunch. But you never know — you might like us. Sometimes we're regular devils, I tell you!"

Her shrill little laugh slid up the scale. Fran's headache trembled. "Let me think about it, all right?"

Jenny sobered. She patted Fran's arm; heavy rings battered like stones.

"Now, dear, we've all been in your position. We understand. Believe me, it's so important that you begin to take positive steps. Let us help you, hmm?"

Fran closed her eyes, wanting to resist, but her energy was gone. "All right. Lunch."

"Wonderful! Tuesday at 11:30, then. I'll come escort you myself. And I'll bet you'll be glad you came. We're a fun bunch."

But when she started along the pathway on Tuesday, Jenny's hand tucked firmly under her arm, Fran almost lost her nerve. She stopped. "Jenny, I don't think—"

She'd never been alone here — in all the places where she and Phil had been together. The little duffer's golf course, the barbecue pit, the rose garden where Phil used to sit and read. She'd had such hopes for life at Greenhill — retirement, financial stability, good times. She'd been upset at Phil's dark joke when they first saw the Greenhill Retirement Village entrance sign — "*G, R, V.* We're just two letters away from the grave, kid." Now he was gone and she was not. But Jenny was ignoring her reluctance, towing her steadily on. Fran swallowed hard and followed.

Pru Harris was the same horsey woman Fran remembered. Her head seemed square — graying brown bob; low, straight bangs; even her teeth were large and square. She clutched Fran to her bony chest before she could resist, eyes fixed somewhere over Fran's head. "God, Jenny," she bawled, "you were right! I see exactly what you mean!"

Fran pushed herself away. "I beg

your pardon?" she murmured.

But Jenny spun her toward the third woman, a little, round thing with anxious eyes.

"I used to watch you and your husband in the pool," Thora White said in a small, apologetic voice. "You both swam so well and were so brown. I'm very sorry to hear—"

"Why, Thora, how gauche!" Jenny laughed gaily, whirling Fran away again, but not before Fran saw Thora's face mottle as though she'd been slapped.

"Now, Fran's here to have a good time, and we're going to help. She's taking a big positive step today. Come, girls, help me set things out. Wait till you see, Fran — we're having such a lovely lunch!"

The next thing Fran knew, she was seated at a little table on Jenny's patio and the women were coaxing her into a truly lovely lunch. Soft little sandwiches, crisp raw vegetables, lots of chilled white wine, and Fran ate more than she'd been able to in weeks. Their voices flowed around her, including her without forcing her participation, and an hour or so passed without one aching memory of Phil. Several times she was puzzled to see Pru examining the air above her head. Thora offered little besides underlining Jenny and Pru; Jenny was definitely the leader here.

They finished with fresh strawberries and sour cream, lounging lazily in the shade of Jenny's little maple

tree. Fran had had too much wine. She watched them, feeling the tension ease inside. How kind and caring they were, and how guilty she felt remembering her reservations about Jenny. Despite her oddness, Jenny was sweet and generous. She was offering friendship and belonging, and Fran felt that maybe life could be good again. If only. If only Phil would be there when she got home.

Everyone had still more wine. Fran felt hazy, heavy. She wanted to sleep. How long had it been since she'd slept a night through?

"Tell me, Thora," Jenny said idly. "Is there any news from your daughter?"

In the small pause, Fran heard Thora's sharp intake of breath. Pru straightened expectantly in her chair. "No," Thora murmured. "You know I'd tell you if there was."

Jenny popped another berry into her red little mouth. She addressed Fran. "Children are such ungrateful beasts sometimes, honestly. Thora's totally estranged from her only child. can you imagine? Hasn't heard from her in years — doesn't even know where she is. Poor Thora — she's all alone."

Her tone was lazy; she might have been discussing the weather. Thora's head bowed; her hands trembled in her lap.

"Well, dear, I wish I had your problem," Jenny went on. "Here I am with three successful, handsome sons—

married, nice families — and I can't keep them away. Every time I look around, seems like there's a son or grandson underfoot."

Thora's sound was small and muffled. Fran squinted through heavy eyelids. Didn't Jenny see what she was doing?

"But you have us, don't you, dear? Pru and me. You know we love you, hmm?"

Thora raised wet eyes and nodded, lips trembling in a grateful smile.

"Do you have children, Fran?"

Pru's sudden question caught her defenses down. She tried to clear her head; pain came crushing back.

"Uh—no. We didn't—couldn't—"

"How sad." Jenny nibbled another berry. "Most men want children so." Her eyes were wide and bright. "I suppose you showered love on cats and dogs?"

"No." Fran fought the pain. "Just on Phil. I only — all I ever wanted was Phil."

She cried then. For the first time, long and hard. And they were there to comfort her, shoulders ready, voices soothing: "There, there. Cry. You'll feel better, honestly."

And she did. When it was over, and Jenny bathed her swollen eyes while Pru made strong, hot tea, she still ached, but the iron band around her chest was gone. She smiled up into Jenny's face.

"I didn't know how badly I needed to do that."

"Well, of course you did." Jenny smoothed her cheek. "I'm so glad we were here to help."

When she was invited for bridge on the following afternoon, she accepted without hesitation. Then they all walked her back to her cottage, arm in arm along the pathway, Jenny and Pru giggling like girls.

"The Greenhill Gang!" Jenny cried. "Aren't we silly?" She lowered her voice to a stage whisper, rolling her eyes at a couple strolling by. "But at least we're not old!"

Fran eyed the silvered heads slowly passing and shivered. She'd just realized it — she wasn't ready to be old.

She woke late on the following morning, and the wrench at the sight of the empty pillow beside her seemed slighter. She ate a good breakfast and worked for an hour in her sadly neglected yard. At bridge time she walked alone to Jenny's house. Jenny clapped her hands.

"Good girl! I was just coming to get you. A positive step all on your own. My dear, you look better already."

Fran and Thora lost badly at bridge. At times Fran almost suspected Jenny and Pru of reneging and signaling across the table. Thora didn't appear to notice, however, so when Jenny squealed, "Rubber! We win again!" it didn't matter. Fran was having fun.

There were more lunches and more bridge, always at Jenny's house. Much laughter and silliness was involved. Fran decided she liked being part of the Gang. When old friends called, she made excuses, feeling superior to their doddering ways.

She admired pictures of Pru's son and daughter, equine replicas of their mother, and was introduced briefly to each departed husband. Eugene White had been a doctor, an apparently domineering man who relegated Thora to the home and care of the now elusive daughter. Thora had little to say about him except that he was bald at thirty and clipped his toenails in the kitchen. Sam Harris was something of a mystery — Pru hinted that his money had been made through "foreign investments." Their son had assumed his father's business, and healthy checks from unknown sources still found their way to Pru each month. His death, she revealed with a whinny, "was a relief, no kidding. At least it came from natural causes!"

Harold Londo had been a real estate tycoon. His picture resided on the piano — a pale giant of a man with a slitted stare. "Poor Harold." Jenny flicked manicured nails at Harold's squint. "The man was a nerd before they were invented, my dear, but what a money-making machine. Oh, it was wonderful how Harold accumulated more and more money!"

For her part, it was still too soon

for Fran to dig. "Phil was a wonderful man. We were married thirty-eight years and were devoted to one another every day of it. He was a perfect husband; I guess that says it all."

Jenny's bright eyes rested on her. "Well, dear, how lucky for you," she drawled. Fran could only shrug modestly.

Each time they met, she felt an odd charge growing in the atmosphere; sometimes the air almost seemed to crackle when she entered. Jenny and Pru often whispered together, exchanging meaningful looks or gazing intently over her head. When she arrived one spring afternoon for bridge, she knew at once that something different was about to happen. The bridge table and chairs were set, but no cards were in evidence. They all stood watching her. Jenny and Pru looked exalted; Thora's eyes were huge, her face pale.

"What is it? What's the matter?" Fran asked.

The usually sunny living room was dim, drapes pulled. With a slow, dramatic glide, Jenny took her arm and led her to the table. In unison, everyone sank into place.

"We're not playing bridge today," Jenny announced solemnly. She folded her hands on the table. "Fran, dear, what do you know about auras?"

Silence — tick tick tick. "About what?"

"I suspected as much. An aura is an emanation, a reflection of the inner

spirit. Everyone has one, but only those with the secrets can see them. Never mind how, but I know the secrets, Fran, and I've revealed them to Thora and Pru. You see, we've sought you out. You have one of the strongest auras I've ever seen."

Fran stared at her. Jenny was spoiling it, the joy she felt in their company. They all looked creepy, owling up at her. Next it would be the Ouija board. Unsettled, she started to rise.

Jenny caught her arm and stayed her, a grip surprisingly strong for someone of her age and size.

"Look, Pru," she breathed. "She's having an emotional upheaval. Have you ever seen anything like it?"

"Never," Pru whispered, eyes fixed on the top of Fran's head.

"Thora?" Jenny prompted, then: "Thora! Isn't it strong?"

Tick tick tick. "Oh yes," Thora said, gazing in Fran's general direction. "Very, very strong." Fran knew Thora didn't see a thing.

"I noticed it the first time I saw you," Jenny went on, her rings threatening circulation in Fran's arm. "But since — ah — oh, damn — what was your husband's name?"

"Phil," Fran whispered, mesmerized.

"Since Phil's death, it's incredible. Extreme emotional stress, you see. People with strong auras are capable of unusual powers, my dear. You simply must join us. I'll be devastated if you don't."

Fran didn't know what to say. "Are you talking — like séances and things?" she ventured finally.

A muscle at the corner of Jenny's eye twitched. Then her little laugh skittered up the scale. Pru snorted, and, at a look from Jenny, even Thora offered a "heh heh."

"How silly!" Jenny said. "That's gloomy stuff! I'm talking about fun! You must at least give it a try!"

This was ridiculous. Why didn't she just get up and leave? "Well—"

The muscle in Jenny's cheek quivered again. "Good! I'll get the juice. All right, girls, get ready."

Fran sat helpless. The mood in the room was infectious. Jenny scurried into the kitchen and back, bearing a small silver bowl that she placed ceremoniously in the center of the table. "The juice," she intoned, and everyone but Fran made appreciative sounds.

"Now," Jenny said, "pay attention, Fran. At my signal, everyone places their fingers in the juice — thumbs, too. For one full minute we must have complete silence. Close your eyes and clear your mind — not one sound." She checked her diamond-studded watch. "Everyone ready? Now!"

Mindlessly, Fran plunged her hands into the bowl. Just as quickly she retrieved them. The liquid was cold, like slightly thickened Jell-O; it adhered to her skin.

"Ugh! What *is* this?"

Jenny's eyes snapped open, shooting cold fire, but Pru bawled quickly, "Dishwashing liquid! You're *soaking* in it!"

Instantly, Jenny dissolved into giggles. "Oh, Madge, honestly!" she squealed, and Pru haw-hawed in harmony.

"All right," Jenny said at last, wiping her eyes. "We'll begin again. Now!"

Obediently, Fran plunged again. The sensation wasn't so bad once she got used to it. It might have been her imagination, but the solution seemed to tingle on her skin.

"Time," Jenny said. Everyone withdrew dripping digits and dried them on a tea towel Jenny solemnly handed around.

"Into the car." Jenny was breathless with excitement. "Just let me put the juice away." She dashed away into the kitchen.

Fran stood uncertainly as the others did. "The car?"

"Come on, come on." Pru herded her to the door.

Then they were all in Jenny's white Cadillac, hurtling through city streets. Without a doubt, Jenny was the most terrifying driver Fran had ever seen. Everything on the road was apparently there only to annoy Jenny — she careened from lane to lane with giddy abandon, ignoring traffic lights and rights-of-way. Her sole courtesy was to announce her presence abroad with constant blasts of the Caddy's

horn. In the front seat she and Pru whispered, heads together. Beside Fran, Thora gazed idly out the window. Fran swallowed and hung on. "If we take lots of trips, I'll be glad to drive sometimes."

Jenny turned full round to call into the backseat. "Certainly not! I always drive!"

The Caddy lurched into a lane change, barely missing the kiss of a station wagon's front bumper. Pru grinned over her shoulder.

"Isn't she a terror? Jenny Londo's notorious in this town!"

"Oh officer," Jenny vamped obligingly, batting her lashes, "did I make a mistake? We're just four little old ladies—"

"In tennis shoes!" Pru hauled up a big, sneakered foot to wave it in the air. She and Jenny collapsed in merriment, and the Caddy snarled toward the curb, skinning it as they screamed by. Fran folded her hands in her lap and closed her eyes. It was the best way.

A whine of rubber and sickening lurch signified the end of their journey. Fran opened her eyes — Four Corners, a large shopping mall. She followed her companions from the car, giving the panting Caddy a sympathetic pat.

"Are we going shopping? I didn't bring a purse."

Jenny's cheeks were flushed. She giggled at Fran's question.

"Yes, a little shopping, dear. Pru,

you and Thora go on. I'll take Fran with me this time. We'll meet back here at the car."

It was all too odd. Fran found herself following Jenny across the parking lot without a reason why. What was she doing with these people? And why was she willingly going along?

Jenny slowed on the wide walkway fronting a supermarket. Traffic flowed steadily both ways through the automated doors.

"Fran, dear, what are you planning to have for dinner?"

"Dinner? I hadn't thought — why do you—"

"How about a nice little steak? Does that sound good?"

"Well, yes—"

"You stand right here. Don't move. Watch me very carefully, but don't say a single word, you understand?"

Fran could only nod helplessly. For a few minutes they simply stood, Jenny studying shoppers approaching the market doors. When a young woman in a smart pantsuit strolled toward them, Jenny moved.

"Excuse me, dear," she said, drifting between the woman and the doors, "would you happen to have the time?"

The woman paused, raising her wrist. Jenny leaned quite close and laid her hand on the woman's lifted arm.

If Fran hadn't been watching closely, she would have missed it. A

spray of brilliant white lights exploded from the place where Jenny's fingers rested — like a sparkler's display on the 4th of July, but silent. They lasted seconds and were gone. The woman dropped her arm, smiling.

Jenny spoke softly and distinctly. "Would you be kind enough to pick up a couple of things for me? A small filet mignon, a Cornish hen, and a bag of fresh asparagus would be nice. You'll do that for me, won't you, dear?"

"I'll be glad to," the woman said.

"Thank you. See that post where my friend is standing? We'll be waiting there. Don't hurry with your shopping, dear; take your time. Bring our things to us when you're done."

"All right."

Jenny removed her hand, and the woman moved into the market. Openmouthed, Fran watched her disappear inside. Jenny trotted back, beaming. "Now, what do you think of that?"

"But — but —" Fran sputtered. "You didn't give her any money!"

"That's right."

"I saw lights, Jenny, and — I don't understand —" A terrible suspicion made her catch her breath. "The juice! We put our fingers in it. You touched — oh my God, Jenny!"

Jenny was so excited she threatened to bounce right off the ground. "Didn't I tell you we'd have fun?"

Fran couldn't get the words out fast enough. "How can that happen — doesn't she know — I don't believe

it — Jenny, what's in that stuff?"

"Never you mind what's in it. It works; that's enough for you to know."

"Are you sure?"

"It's never failed us yet."

Fran stared at her in awe. "You've done this before."

"Oh my dear, lots of times! Lots and lots. We started small today, just so you can get the hang of it."

Fran gazed at the market doors. "She's really going to buy those things? And just hand them over?"

"You bet!" Jenny clasped her hands. "Are you impressed?"

"But what happens when she — when it wears off?"

"That's the best part!" And this time Jenny really did give a little bounce. "She won't remember a thing! Oh, she might wonder what those extra charges are, but most of 'em don't even check, you know. It's foolproof; don't you worry about a thing."

"But — but I could afford to buy those things myself." Yet she couldn't deny the swoop of exhilaration inside.

"Of course! We all could. That's not the point, silly, don't you see?" There was a shadow of disappointment in Jenny's eyes.

"Isn't it — isn't it a little like stealing?"

The corners of Jenny's mouth drew open. "It's paid for, isn't it? And I ask you, did that woman look like she could afford a few extras? I'd never choose some poor little person with holes in her shoes." She pouted.

"Honestly, Fran, you're going to spoil it if you don't stop."

"I'm just —"

"Excuse me?"

The woman was back. Fran shrank guiltily away.

"Here you are."

Jenny's little paws clutched eagerly for the proffered items. "Thank you so much, dear."

"You're welcome."

"You can go now." The woman turned. "Have a nice day," Jenny called after her, and in a minute she and Fran were scuttling for the car.

When the four were together again, Fran watched in dumb amazement as they compared hauls. Jenny oohed over Pru's new silk blouse, but sighed at Thora's contribution — a bag of fertilizer from the hardware store.

"Honestly, Thora!"

Thora's face fell. "Well, I couldn't think of anything else I needed."

"Need! Need has nothing to do with it — how many times do I have to tell you?"

And they roared back toward Greenhill, Fran sitting silent, her perfect little filet lying heavy in her lap. At Jenny's house, they separated with their loot.

"Don't ever breathe a word of this to anyone," Jenny cautioned Fran. "It's like a sacred trust. Next time you get to try it out. Enjoy your dinner, dear!"

Next time. All the while she broil-

ed the filet to perfection, Fran thought about it. She'd never had a more astonishing experience. It wasn't right; she knew that. Every bite of steak should have choked her, but it didn't. It was delicious. Exhausted, she fell asleep early, well fed.

The escapade was not mentioned again. They continued with little lunches and bridge. With her now slightly jaundiced eye, Fran determined that Jenny and Pru definitely cheated at cards. Several times she almost called them on it, then didn't. Thora seemed oblivious, but by now Fran recognized Thora for what she was — the Gang gofer and butt of Jenny's moods. Thora didn't seem to mind. That wasn't right either, but Fran stayed silent.

Yet the association with the Gang seemed good for her. Little by little she felt herself grow stronger. Jenny encouraged her to talk about Phil; good therapy, she said. Once started, Fran talked of little else, bringing him into every conversation — things he'd said, how kind, how loving, how funny he'd been. Once Jenny interrupted with a hint of strain, "Dear, he sounds almost too good to be true."

"I know," Fran conceded warmly. "He was."

"Tell me, what did he do for a living?"

"Oh, many things. He was an entrepreneur."

Jenny smiled sweetly. "Then all the money was on your side of the marriage."

For a moment Fran was too shocked to answer. For all her kindness, in spite of the fun and loving attention paid, sometimes there were still things about Jenny that Fran didn't like. "Phil took very good care of me — always. I've gotten everything in my life I wanted," was her stiff reply.

Then the day came when the juice was brought forth again from the kitchen cupboard. The wild ride through town only heightened the anxiety ballooning inside Fran. As they lunged around a corner, forcing a hapless biker into the bushes, she said sharply, "You're going to kill someone someday, Jenny, if you're not more careful."

Jenny's eyes met hers in the rear-view mirror. The look was long, measuring. Nothing was said.

Good humor surfaced again, however, when they reached their destination. For Fran's debut they supported her as a group, clustering around her, murmuring instructions and encouragement. Part of her felt wretched. It wasn't right. But temptation was stronger. Swallowing hard, she selected a distinguished gentleman approaching an exclusive ladies' shop, and, with the help of an energetic shove from Jenny, she stepped into his path.

"Excuse me, sir."

He slowed, glancing down at her.

He was quite tall.

"Do you have the time?"

He shook his head regretfully, smiling. "Sorry. I don't carry a watch."

Panic. She froze. He started to step around her. Fran uttered a little moan and shook one foot in the air.

"Oh! Oh!! I have a rock in my shoe."

The man paused. Behind her she heard admiring murmurs. Reaching out, she steadied herself with a hand on his arm.

The sparkler lights sprayed. The man waited.

"Do you see that lounge robe in the window — the rose one?" Fran's voice shook. "Will you buy it for me? Only blue — see if they have it in blue."

"My pleasure," he said. Elation exploded inside her. She waited. He waited. Oh yes; she removed her hand from his arm.

"Thank you," she whispered, and he turned toward the shop's door.

"Excuse me! Excuse me, sir?"

He hesitated at the entrance. Damn. Was she supposed to touch him again? What if that fouled things up? But maybe it wouldn't work if she didn't. Recklessly she seized his arm, and the sparks bloomed again.

"Size twelve," she instructed gravely.

"Twelve," he repeated. She released him, and he was gone.

They bobbed around her, exultant.

"That rock-in-the-shoe bit was

brilliant!" Jenny cried. "Oh, quick thinking, dear!"

Even Thora was smiling. "Every bit as good as Jenny, honestly, Fran!"

Instantly she was wrapped in the invisible frost Jenny turned on her. "Really, Thora? Do you think so?"

"Oh well, I only meant —" Thora shrank away, deflated.

Fran's heart pounded so she could scarcely hear. She watched the shop door; in a few minutes the distinguished gentleman reappeared, carrying a large white box. Smiling, he laid it in her trembling arms.

"Blue. Size twelve."

She had enough presence of mind to say, "Thank you so much. That will be all."

As soon as he'd disappeared, the Gang whisked her back to the car. She was so light-headed she felt nauseated. While the others scattered to do their own shopping, she recovered in the car, eyes closed.

Reassembled, giddy with conquest, Pru had a ring with a large, garish ruby; Jenny, a set of crystal bowls. Thora's booty was a new coffeepot.

It was during the ride home that everything turned sour for Fran. She scarcely noticed the horns, the leaping pedestrians, glancing up in abstraction when the Caddy careened onto a curb and bounced back again. When they disbanded at Jenny's house, she lingered behind.

"Jenny, I'm going to return the robe."

Jenny's mouth dropped. "What did you say?"

"I can't keep it. It isn't right."

The frilly little voice was edged. "How can you take it back? You didn't buy it."

"I feel guilty. Don't you? Using people like that. This juice — what if it doesn't wear off? How do you know what it might do?"

Jenny's eyes narrowed. "I know exactly what it will do — anything it's told to. I must say, you disappoint me, Fran. I thought you'd be happy with our little group."

It was time to clear the air. "So did I," Fran said miserably, "But I'm not. I don't like the things you do. For one thing, I know you cheat at cards."

Jenny was silent for a long moment. Fran realized there were actually many things she didn't like about her.

"You've certainly changed, haven't you, from the sad little weepy we welcomed into our hearts. Have you forgotten how much we've helped you, dear?"

Fran flushed. "You were kind, and I'm grateful. But that doesn't mean I can go along with — this." The robe's box burned into her arms. "Phil would never approve."

Jenny made a hissing sound. Her smile was forced and fierce. "I think we're all getting a little sick of hearing about your precious Phil, dear. I know I personally have had a stomachful. If you don't go along with us

when we use the juice, you can't belong to the Gang. Now that you know its secret, you're obligated to me."

Blackness filled Fran's head; her ears roared. She could have handled almost anything Jenny said, but to bring Phil into it, to denigrate Phil —

Moving carefully, she reached for the door. She would be in the safety of her own home before she would cry.

"I'll keep the robe, and I will never tell anyone about the juice. But I'm not in your gang anymore, Jenny; I'm out. What's more, I don't ever want to see or talk to you again."

She was on the stoop. Jenny followed her to the door. "I won't let you do this. No one has ever walked out on my gang."

"I have." Down the step, feet firm on the path.

"I promise you, you'll be sorry," came Jenny's soft words behind her.

Head high, Fran walked away. In the safety of her own cottage, she huddled on the sofa, hugging the box, until the storm passed.

Two days passed before Jenny marched up and pounded on her door. Fran watched her through the peephole. Jenny's eyes were cold, but her face wore a pasted-on smile.

"Now, Fran dear, I know you're in there. Let me in. We can straighten out this little misunderstanding."

Fran watched her mouth, remembered it saying those things about Phil. She remained silent. Finally, Jen-

ny went away. When the phone rang and rang a few minutes later, Fran leaned against the kitchen counter, drinking tea. Never. She could never forgive that.

The next time, Jenny brought Pru and Thora marching with her. They all stood on the little stoop while Jenny yoo-hooed through the door.

"Fran, we look silly standing out here when everyone knows you're in. What will people think? They'll think you've gone a little goofy, that's what. Please, dear, let us in."

Two days passed. Fran met an old acquaintance from the village in the pharmacy.

"Fran, I'm so glad to know you're out and about. It hurt me to see you after Phil's death. I wanted to help, but you were so down."

"I'm afraid I took it very hard," Fran said. "I'm better now. It's just that — we were so close."

The woman patted Fran's shoulder. "You know, I worried for a while that you were getting in too thick with that silly Jenny Londo and her gang. She descends on everyone as soon as she hears the bad news."

Fran's heart lurched. "What do you know about the Gang?"

"Not much. But all I care to, believe me. Why, that woman was on my doorstep before poor John was buried. As soon as she started in about that aura business, and how mine was the strongest she'd ever seen, I showed her the door."

Fran looked away. What a fool she'd been. Had Jenny laughed at her willingness to believe? "Yes," she murmured. "Well, I don't see them anymore."

"Let's get together sometime soon."

"Yes, let's do."

A delivery truck was pulled up in front of her cottage when she drove in. The driver was just opening the rear doors.

"Mrs. Rawlings? I got your order here."

He lifted out several large white boxes. Fran paled. They bore the name of the shop where the man had purchased her robe.

"I didn't — what are those?"

He consulted his delivery sheet. "Says here six lounge robes, assorted colors. Size twelve, COD. That comes to—"

"No!" He looked up, startled. "I didn't order those! Take them back. There's been a mistake."

"Now, look here, ma'am—"

"I don't want them!" She fled for her door. "Take them back!"

Inside, she paced until her anger cooled. What a nasty person Jenny Londo was. What would she do? Ignore it. Maybe Jenny would get tired if she didn't respond.

One afternoon during a stroll, studiously avoiding Jenny's lane, Thora suddenly materialized before her.

"Why are you being so mean to Jenny, I'd like to know?"

Fran studied the accusing face. Poor, sad little sheep. "I'm not. I just don't want to do the kinds of things the Gang does."

"It's just innocent fun," Thora protested.

"It isn't innocent and it isn't fun. Why do you put up with them, Thora? They pick on you and treat you like a servant. You're not like them."

Thora's face blotted red. "I am *too* like them! Jenny Londo's my best friend! I thought you were my friend, too!"

"I could be, if you want me to. Do you?"

Thora backed away. "Not if you don't like Jenny." When she turned, she broke into a trot. "I'll bet all those things Jenny says about your Phil are true, too!" she fired over her shoulder.

"What? What?" Fran started after her, but Thora was faster than she looked. She got away.

Fran stormed home, slamming her front door behind her. Two steps into the room, she saw it — Phil's portrait, the one she'd commissioned for their silver anniversary. It hung over the fireplace in a place of honor, and it now sported a curly black Magic Marker mustache.

Later she didn't remember running all the way to Jenny's, pounding and kicking at the door. The Caddy was in the drive, but no one answered. Back in her living room, she let the phone ring fifty-seven times before

Jenny's little voice answered.

"I ought to have you arrested! I've never — how could you do such a thing to my Phil's face?"

"Fran, dear? Is that you?"

"I'm going to call the police. I am! For this and for those robes. I don't know — how did you get into my house?"

Jenny's voice sounded concerned. "Are you all right, dear? You sound upset. Someone's been in your house, you say? You'll have to have proof before you accuse anyone, you know. Is there something I can do?"

"Yes!" Fran choked through clenched teeth. "Leave me alone, Jenny, or I *will* tell about the juice, I swear."

Jenny laughed merrily. "Oh, you couldn't do that. You'd have to implicate yourself. You did keep the robe, remember? Besides, who would believe you?" Fran wanted to, but she couldn't make a sound. "Well, it was nice to hear from you. Oh, and Fran? You shouldn't go away and leave your bathroom window open. The screens pop right out, you know — they all do here."

While she was replacing the bathroom screen, Jenny's car zoomed past her house. Pru's bray lingered long after they were gone.

The telephone calls started a few days later. The caller usually hung up as soon as Fran answered, but sometimes there was laughter, a little trickle scooting up the scale. Then they

started at night. They said things about Phil, in a badly disguised voice, and that Fran was really such a fool. Soon after, a voice began calling that she didn't recognize, but she'd seen a new woman with the Gang a few times, so she didn't have to guess who it was.

The worst one came on a lovely sunny morning. Birds sang in Fran's garden, and she was baking herself a chocolate cake. The woman asked for Phil.

"Whoever you are, stop this!" Fran grated. "You must be a sick person to do such things simply because Jenny says so. How dare you try to disgrace the memory of my husband?"

She heard whispering at the other end. "Why, Fran," the new voice recited as though reading it, "you must know about Phil's women. My goodness, I wasn't the only one. The whole village knows he married you for your money and got his amusement on the side."

She hoped the cardrum at the other end broke when her receiver smashed down.

Immediately she called an acquaintance in the village, a woman who always knew everything going on.

"Have you been hearing things — you know, rumors — about my Phil?"

"Oh Fran," the woman clucked sympathetically, "you know no one believes a thing that Jenny Londo says."

The remainder of the day was endless. When Fran was distraught and needed to think, she ate. The entire chocolate cake disappeared; still her hunger remained. Late in the evening she finally recognized it for what it was — a different kind of hunger. And she knew what she must do.

She watched Jenny's house the following morning until she saw the Cadillac pull away. At least Jenny had been truthful about one thing — her bathroom screen popped out with little fuss.

Back home, Fran sat at her kitchen table, staring at the little bowl.

She'd almost believed it — almost convinced herself that the Phil she'd manufactured after his death was real. She had researched Greenhill carefully, made certain no one knew him there. She liked it — the grace, the affluence — she wanted to stay, to live here the remainder of her days. And Phil had promised, faithfully promised, that there would be no more women. She'd threatened to cut him off without a dime if there were. How many had there been in their life together — and how many moves when she couldn't live with the humiliation anymore? She'd thought Greenhill would be safe; Phil was past sixty and already nursing a bad heart. Now she simply couldn't bear to move again.

She sighed. He'd always told her she got what she deserved. He never

kept the women a secret. On the contrary, he usually told her, in detail, every time. She'd wanted him so badly that she bought him, he reminded, and he happened to be the kind of man who would let himself be bought. Just consider what manner of man would do that, he'd said. She got what she deserved.

But how had Jenny found out? Unless she was guessing — or making it up. Had there been women here? Could Jenny even be one of them? Now Fran would never know if Phil had finally kept his promise this one last time.

Well. It didn't matter. Jenny wasn't the type to let it rest; it could only get worse. There'd be more laughter, more pity, more sliding glances and whispers everywhere she went. Fran had no choice — something had to be done. For the first time in her married life, she had the husband she wanted, and she couldn't risk losing him now.

She gazed long and thoughtfully at the little bowl with its puddle of juice in the bottom. The big jar, filched from Jenny's kitchen cabinet, was safely hidden away. Jenny had vowed the juice would do anything it was told to. Fran took a deep breath and eased her fingers into the bowl.

Jenny was back; she opened her door on the second ring. At the sight of Fran, the painted doll became fretful, a frown puffing the blonde bangs, mouth thinning to tight lines.

"I'm sure I don't know what you're doing here, Fran Rawlings. I have nothing to say to you."

Fran hung her head. "Jenny, I'm sorry. I'd like to make up. I don't know what's come over me lately."

"It's too late for that now, you know." But the gleam in her eye said she wanted to see Fran grovel. "We don't want you back in the Gang."

"I know," Fran whispered. "Could I come inside for a minute, though? You're so good, Jenny. I just don't want it to end this way."

Jenny thought it over. Then she stepped back with a magnanimous gesture. "All right. But only for a minute."

Fran stepped inside and closed the door behind her. Jenny smiled expectantly. Fran moistened dry lips.

"Jenny, I want you to do me a favor."

Jenny's smile wavered, but before she could speak, Fran reached out and placed her hand on Jenny's arm. A shower of sparks, white, blinding, flowered up between them. Jenny made no indication she saw them. Fran's chest was so tight that she had trouble breathing.

"I want you to get in your car just as soon as I leave. Take a nice drive up into the hills outside town. You know where that boys' camp is?" Jenny nodded slowly. "Just before you get to it, there's a sharp uphill turn and a big drop-off into the valley. A thousand feet straight down — it's a nasty

business, Jenny. Well, when you get to that turn, I want you to drive straight on over the drop-off — down into the valley. Will you do that for me, Jenny, dear?"

Jenny smiled. "Yes."

"Just as soon as I leave."

"Just as soon as you leave."

Fran was shaking. Feeling behind her for the door, she gently released Jenny's arm.

"Thank you, Jenny. I really do thank you."

"You're welcome," Jenny said.

Behind her, as she sped furtively along the path toward home, she heard the Cadillac roar.

All afternoon she waited, going over every detail in her mind. As a driver, Jenny was infamous. People would say she should have had her license revoked long ago. And Fran foresaw no continuance of trouble from Pru and Thora. Pru was only Jenny's cheerleader — she had neither the intelligence nor imagination to carry on alone. As for Thora, well, anyone could have Thora for a smile.

Fran grinned, hugging herself. And

she had Jenny's jar of juice. Each time only used a little; one never knew when it might come in handy. The rumors about Phil would probably die soon without fuel. Her friend had said no one believed Jenny anyway, and she and Phil hadn't lived here long enough for him to become well known. She could soon set his loving memory straight again.

If, however, the rumors continued, well, she had the juice. And old people die from accidents all the time. But she was anxious. When would she hear, and who'd bring the news? She practiced a look of shocked disbelief.

Thora came. At dusk. Fran, watching from her window, spotted her trotting up the pathway. Close up, she could see the swollen face, the tears. Thora's little hands wrung the air before her.

Fran relaxed, calming her smile, just two welcome steps away from her door. It had gone off rather well. Jenny would have been proud of her. She had taken a very big, very positive step today.



J. P. Boyd was raised in a suburb of Boston and studied at Harvard for seven years, emerging with a Ph. D. in applied physics in 1976. He is now associate professor of atmospheric and oceanic science at the University of Michigan. His SF stories have appeared in Asimov's and Amazing, and his first for F&SF is a time travel tale with an offbeat twist.

The Anger of Time

BY
J. P. BOYD

David ap Jones, nicknamed Taffy from the Welsh pronunciation of his first name, had been born in Cardiff in 1780, so at a bit over two hundred, he was far and away the youngest of our little group in the Struldrug Club. Our quiet and exceedingly private watering hole was tucked away in a New York City brownstone that was owned by an Englishman who had been keeping inns and pubs since the early Renaissance. Taffy was reading *Time*, which featured Hanno's little gesture as the cover story; and he couldn't understand at all. He was just too young.

Xenophanes, who had been a hoplite in the Greek city of Thebes when he discovered that he was immortal, spent every morning in his library, as if still compensating after twenty-five centuries because he had not learned to read until past fifty. He looked

around at us, very solemnly, and said, "Civilization is an intermission in the anger of time." He turned to me and nodded, "V. S. Pritchett. But Hanno felt the same way."

I hid a smile. He was still far too much the simple, uncomplicated soldier of the Peloponnesus to be a scholar, but I liked him for trying. Yet in his direct way, he had expressed something that we all felt, the sadness that fueled Hanno's lunacy.

Taffy snorted. "Civilization itself seems bloody angry when you're in the mines." He had grown up digging coal until a cave-in that slaughtered his mates had revealed the enormous resilience of his own body. After a long and successful career as a highwayman, he had retired to a new life as a gentleman in the 1830s. So much sadness behind him — but he was not an intelligent man. I tried to help him.

"We all have flashbacks, Taffy. The way a girl tosses her hair, the sunlight glinting off a river, a face that looks like one laid in the earth many centuries past — sometimes the most trivial thing will trigger mental pictures as vividly as a hot electrode touched to the brain. And then we remember a drowning, a battle, a fire roaring and crackling through the overhanging townhouses of a medieval walled city, and we feel it here" — I slapped my breast with my fist — "like a mayfly with angina."

"Yes, yes, but it still makes no logical sense."

I started to reply that it made a great deal of psychological sense, ready with heavy jargon like "redirected behavior," but a deep voice booming behind us forestalled me.

"The African, eh?"

I smiled and shifted my chair so Anjou could sit. The Frenchman was almost two meters tall, a giant of a man, and his primary residences were in Monaco and Paris. But the Strul-drug Club here in New York was the only place in the world where we could gather openly, safely hidden from those we called "mayflies," and he often made the effort.

"It's rather a long story, Jean-Baptiste. Our friend gave up his trade of soldiering several centuries ago, and the ban-the-bomb movement never bothered him. 'The mayflies die too young as it is,' he once told me. But lately, some of the prophets of the

disarmament groups have been asserting that we live in a unique period. 'For the first time, we have learned to destroy the whole world,' and that sort of cant. When Hanno heard this over and over again on television and in the papers — that the human condition had undergone a radical and discontinuous transformation the day Hiroshima was bombed — something just snapped."

Anjou grunted. "A knife is as good as a tank for butchering civilians."

I remembered that he had lost all his family in the sack of Antwerp in 1576, and hurried on. "It's rather a long story I heard from Hanno, and you'll have to forgive me if I tell it in my own way."

The Frenchman waved at our host for a glass of Burgundy, and I began.

The village of Oster was a sleepy farm town in eastern Washington. Lew Kopleman had lost his wife five years earlier, and his children were scattered to the four winds, so he had a lot of time on his hands. He liked to fish and take long walks to manage his arthritis, but he also kept his hand in with soybeans and a garden.

It was still twilight when he scuffed out into his fields to "walk the beans"; that is, to shuffle through the crop pulling weeds. He had barely begun when he heard the clank of metal a quarter mile away.

It did not sound like a car. Lew

Kopleman was seventy years old, but there was nothing wrong with his hearing. He frowned and went back to his weeding.

When he heard more sounds, as though someone was moving through the scraggly forest off to his left, he pulled off his heavy work gloves and walked toward the noise. He was at the very edge of the trees when he saw the intruder.

The boy was tall and rippled with weight-room muscle. Nonetheless, he looked a little scared, like a sophomore sitting outside the principal's office, but he was older, perhaps nineteen or twenty. He also was wearing a plumed bronze helmet, a metal cuirass, bronze greaves covering his lower legs, heavy sandals with thongs that spiraled up under his greaves; and he was carrying a concave, rectangular shield and a javelin as high as a man.

Lew Kopleman was aware that legionnaires in eastern Washington are not common. He scowled and shouted, "What are you sneaking around here for?"

The boy turned around suddenly, bumped the long iron shank of his spear on a tree limb, and dropped the spear. As he bent to retrieve it, he said hastily, "Excuse me, sir, I'm a student at Washington State, and I've been hired to —" He stopped abruptly and suddenly looked even guiltier than before.

"I really shouldn't explain, sir. It's all very —" He stopped, shrugged

helplessly, and then unslung his backpack. He pulled out something that resembled a high-tech water pistol and said apologetically, "I'm really supposed to use the coloring on the spear or my sword first, and then squirt this just for effect, but it just doesn't seem right to throw —" He waved his shield helplessly, closed his eyes, and squeezed the trigger.

For one shocked moment, Lew Kopleman could only stare. Then he looked down at his battered overalls to see a line of red goo running all the way from his shoulder to his waist, and he exploded.

"I'm going to give you a thrashing you'll never forget!"

The youth had removed a compact camera from his bag as soon as he had opened his eyes, but he dropped it and grabbed his spear. "Stay back! Stay back! I'm warning you!"

The elderly farmer had survived goats, bulls, drought, hail, and three sons and a daughter. He wrenched the spear out of the boy's hand, reversed the spear like a quarterstaff, and smacked the side of the boy's face so hard that his helmet fell off.

Howling in pain, the discomforted pretender to the glory that was Rome retreated in unseemly haste through the trees, leaving pack, camera, spear, and — oh, most ignoble — his discarded shield. To speed the boy on his way, the farmer had hurled his spear after him into the forest in a cast that, at least to the boy's terrified

senses, seemed a worthy try at the world javelin record.

As the boy became invisible in the trees, thrashing through the forest as noisily as a bull in lust, Lew Kopleman sighed. His tired old legs would never catch up with the boy. He had heaved the spear butt-first, but it had sailed an impressive distance before crashing into the brush. He gathered up his spoils and walked back to his house.

Then, because it would be far too hot to walk the beans in the afternoon, he returned to his fields. Now that his anger had cooled, he did not want to cause any further trouble for that rather confused young man. From time to time, he would stop and chuckle, remembering when he, too, was young.

Elsewhere in the fields around Oster, Hanno's army moved forward with much less fuss, and claimed victim after victim. The cameras clicked, and the videotape recorders carried by the larger teams were busy imaging the bodies of the slain. Hanno himself chose to go in alone, a little ahead of the others, and take his scalps in his own way.

To little Andrew Whitten, who was only three years old, Hanno did not look fierce at all. Like the college student who had been routed by the old farmer, Hanno was dressed in full legionnaire's kit, but he had added the tongues and great plumed crest of

a centurion. Unlike the youth, however, Hanno was a small man, dark and swarthy like most who were born around the shores of the Mediterranean. When he saw the toddler, he gave him a sad smile. The little boy reminded him of his own small son Hamilcar, who had died in slavery in Ostia before the birth of Caesar.

"Hello. What's your name?"

"Andrew." He slurred the words a little, for he was still very young, and the mysteries of his small world did not lend themselves to adult language. His blue eyes opened wide, looking at the gleaming armor, but he said nothing. He had no words for surprise or adventure; at his age, everything was a marvel, whether a backhoe loader or a dump truck, or a man two thousand years old.

Hanno squatted down, balancing carefully so that his greaves did not chafe the tops of his feet. "Would you like to play a game?"

"Sure!"

Hanno took out a marking pistol similar to the youth's, and fired a stream of red into the air. Andrew squealed and clapped his hands.

"O.K., now I'm going to make your shirt all red. O.K.?"

"Yes, yes."

Hanno made a thoroughgoing mess of the child's little striped shirt, and bloodied his white shorts for good measure. Andrew thought it was all great fun. His mother was *very* strict about dirt, and a boy who lived on the

outskirts of town with open fields behind his house had several acres of good topsoil to tempt him.

"Now, I want you to lie down and play dead. No, no, stretch out." Sighing, Hanno scooped him up in his arms and waved him once in a great arc over his head while the little boy squealed with delight, and then laid him full length on the ground. "No, don't move. Close your eyes." Hanno, who had once been a general, folded his hands as if in prayer and then tilted his head onto them. "Go sleepies. Like this."

Finally the little boy understood, and Hanno took his picture. "Thanks, Andrew. I'm sorry I have to go now."

"Andrew! Andrew!" The boy's mother came around the house, saw the blood on her son's shirt and the stranger gleaming in armor and plume, and screamed.

Hanno had expected her to faint, but she was made of sterner stuff. Shouting and sobbing, she ran straight at them. The small man who was two thousand years old waited until she was within twenty feet, and hit her full in the chest with his pilum.

The weight of the iron shaft knocked her down, but she half sat up before the anesthetic took hold. When she was snoring soundly, Hanno walked over to her body and embellished the wound with a little more goop from his water pistol and took her picture.

"Mommy! Mommy!" Andrew had

screamed when his mother had fallen, and became very upset when he found his shaking didn't wake her.

Hanno took both his little hands in his own and smiled. "She'll sleep until noon, Andrew. I want you to guard her until she wakes up. Can you do that?"

The little boy was obviously confused, and the game wasn't much fun anymore, but the pilum had served its purpose, so Hanno left it to him, and finally was able to walk away leaving the boy contentedly playing by himself close to his mother.

He had just turned onto the city's main street — its only street, really — when he heard the shots.

A few minutes later he was sitting in the town's real estate office, looking at the mayor.

"And Frank and Ernie?"

"The anesthetic will keep your two officers asleep for several hours. One of them fired a couple of warning shots in the air and scared off half a dozen of my men, but I potted them with javelins before anyone came to harm."

The mayor was middle-aged, portly, and terribly afraid. "May I ask why?"

"A lesson, Mr. Mayor. To all humanity. I have nothing in particular against Oster. It was simply a little circle on the map, convenient, within range of my resources. Nothing more. No, the lesson is for everybody."

"I was watching a demonstration

on television one day. Unilateral disarmament, the Russians are all very nice people. Bah! Such nonsense. Children should know better. But I could forgive them that. No one wants a war. All we disagree about are the tactics for preventing one. No, I've seen too many wars myself. I could forgive them that."

Hanno stared off into space for a long time, not speaking, and finally the mayor cleared his voice. "There was something you could not forgive?"

Hanno met the mayor's eyes and half-smiled. In spite of his fear, the old windbag was still trying to protect his people. And he was so nervous he had probably soiled his pants.

"Yes, Mr. Mayor, there was. One of the leaders was interviewed and he said, 'We live in a time of unique danger. Until now, there was never anything that could threaten the whole human race. Little children are afraid of the bomb. This shadow hovers over us all' — And on and on."

The mayor tittered nervously. "I'm not too happy about bombs myself."

Hanno nodded. "No. You're entitled to fear, Mr. Mayor. Fear is healthy. But arrogance is not. The conceit, the insufferable pompous conceit that this generation is unique, that a simple piece of hardware has somehow altered the human condition."

"No, Mr. Mayor. It just won't do. The world is always threatened. The

world *has* ended. Many times."

For a moment, just a moment, he saw a flicker of understanding in the mayor's eyes.

"What are you thinking of, Mr. Mayor?"

The realtor rubbed his paunch. "I was remembering Guam during the war. When the women and the children of the Japanese went over the cliff."

Hanno nodded. "When the bombs fall, it will not comfort the survivors or the dying that other races may still live, somewhere among the stars. When that little happy world in the Pacific, isolated by the ocean, was violated by your planes and ships, it did not comfort the mothers of those children that somewhere else, Japanese still lived."

The mayor nodded. "But we did not want that."

"I know." And Hanno shot the mayor in the chest.

An hour later the trucks had carted all the sleeping bodies off to a secluded glade a couple of miles from town. The college boys and their gaudy outfits were sent on their way, and the oxen and arsonists and plows came in.

It took the rest of the day, but by nightfall the little village of Oster had burned to the ground, and the plows had turned the rubble back into the soil. In two thousand years, Hanno had become a very wealthy man, and he had few uses for his money except

for special projects like this. His thugs went away, and the townspeople woke up in the twilight and began to talk and wonder. Hanno himself had one last chore.

He painted out the name "Oster" on the little sign on Main Street that welcomed the infrequent travelers—kept away this day by a quite unofficial detour sign — and painted on one word. Then he went back to his villa on the Riviera, and thought of it no more.

Taffy Jones was still puzzled when I finished, and tapped the cover of the magazine. "Half a dozen theories explaining why an army of legionnaires would attack a town with blood-squirting water pistols and tranquilizer spears, and then leave the whole place in ruins. And the anonymous donation of ten million dollars to rebuild. The canisters of film sent to major magazines. And that old farmer who kept working his fields right through the holocaust. But no one has explained: *Why?*"

I turned my palms up in a shrug. "He was exorcising his demon. Making a gesture, however irrational, to scab over his wounds."

Xenophanes nodded. "Nothing is more infuriating than to listen to another's sorrows, and realize that they are blind and indifferent to your own."

The big Frenchman asked, "Don't you remember what Hanno painted

on the sign, Taffy? It was the name of his birth city. He was trying to remind the mayflies of this age of another time that the world had ended. And perhaps to tell us that there are always a few like himself who escape from the world's end, to rebuild and remember."

I bowed my head in agreement. "To us, the world is the entire planet, but to a caveman, it was his tribe and a radius of ten miles around where he was born. A lion could reduce his civilization to a handful of huddling, bloodied survivors as quickly as a salvo of falling rockets. A blizzard or an epidemic could slaughter everyone he loved, even every human he had ever known, as thoroughly as nuclear winter. And his children — they whimpered at night in the caves because they saw the scars on those who came back, and fever deaths and hunters who did not return were as much a part of the frights of infancy as the thunder and the rain."

Xenophanes murmured his quotation under his breath, but his eyes were staring off into space as if he were remembering.

I understood. We all did except Taffy. I myself had been born in Constantinople in the late eighth century when it was still a city of gold and marble, a center of learning, art, and luxury. When it finally fell to the infidels, I came west just in time for the brawling of the Renaissance. We had all seen the cities die, the sackings

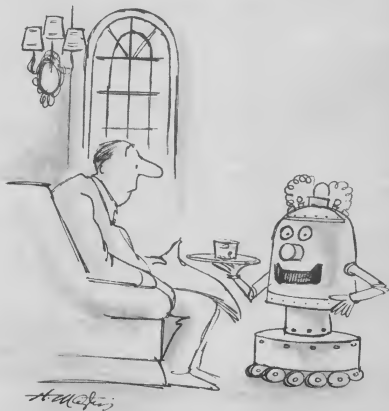
and the burnings, with our own eyes; and through books, we could name hundreds of lost civilizations that we had not seen. "An intermission in the anger of time." That was all we were ever given, whether the weapons were bronze, or iron, or uranium.

Taffy's brow furrowed, and I knew the Welshman was losing his temper.

I finally took pity on him.

"In 146 B.C., the Romans, as they had with many other nations, sacked and burned a city in Africa, slew all the males, sold the women and children into slavery, and plowed salt into the rubble so that not even weeds would grow."

"Hanno is a Carthaginian."



"Good evening, club member M375! Lighten up! Smile! Here's lookin' at you! Cheers! Down the hatch! Enjoy! Have a nice day! Not to worry! Ta ta!"

In which the minstrel Lythande and a fellow magician seek shelter at an alehouse and encounter an unwelcome surprise . . .

Bitch

BY

MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY

Darkness falling in Old Gandrin, in an unfamiliar quarter of the city; Lythande, Pilgrim Adept of the Blue Star, alone, isolated, and abandoned, far from her usual haunts — insofar as she had usual haunts, or could count on anything to recur and be ordinary in her far from ordinary life. To add to the general dismalness of the night, a light rain was falling — not heavy but a drizzling persistence, not enough to soak anything, but enough to banish dryness, warmth, or comfort and imbue everything with a miserable and pervasive dampness throughout.

Although the streets of Old Gandrin were perhaps safer for an Adept of the Blue Star than for an average citizen, they could hardly be said to be altogether safe for anyone after dark, and Lythande had no more desire than anyone else to be attacked

or robbed in the deserted fields in the graveyard district. She had come there considerably earlier in the day in search of certain herbs and ingredients for the making of spells; it was said to add to the efficacy of such ingredients that they grew or had been gathered in the shadow of the gallows.

Lythande was not altogether certain that she believed this; but if the clients of the magician believed it, she could hardly afford the luxury of flaunting this belief; after all, belief was a major ingredient that must be liberally stirred into every spell before it could work at all.

Around her stretched a series of barren open fields that had perhaps been last cultivated before the city walls were built; here and there the dim lights of occasional scattered dwellings in the rainy darkness. Even if the night had been clear, there

would have been little moon; it was her business to know such things. The aforesaid gallows cast a long and wavering shadow almost to Lythande's very feet; there was no sign anywhere of light such as might have marked out an inn or any such place where one might find lodging. Beyond the gallows a broken field stretched, lumpy and barren with the uneven shapes of old and fallen gravestones. A deserted place, good perhaps for ghosts but less salubrious for mortals; and Lythande, in spite of a life prolonged by magic to the span of three ordinary lifetimes, still counted herself among the living and mortal.

At this moment a shadow crossed her path and a not unfamiliar voice spoke: "Who goes there? Speak!"

"I am a minstrel and magician by the name of Lythande," she said, and in answer came the most unexpected of words:

"Greetings, fellow Pilgrim; what do you on this lonely road at this god-forgotten hour?"

"If indeed there are gods, a question about which I entertain certain doubts," Lythande observed calmly, "I would think it unlucky to call any place god-forgotten, in the fear that they might in fact forget it."

"Even if there be no gods," replied the newcomer, a dark shadow on the path, "I should consider it unlucky to say so, for fear that if they do in fact exist and I show bad manners by refusing to believe in them, they

might retaliate by refusing to believe in me."

Lythande found the sound of that paradox sufficiently familiar to say, "Do I speak, then, to a fellow Pilgrim?"

"You do," replied the voice. "I am your fellow minstrel Rajene; we have debated these questions before this time in the courts of the Blue Star to the sound of the lute. Do I guess rightly that we should together seek shelter, if only against damp and ghosts, for the exchange of songs?"

"I am unfamiliar with these quarters," Lythande said. "And while I have not yet encountered a ghost here or elsewhere, I observe somewhat similar precautions about ghosts as you against gods touching their existence or nonexistence; in case I should have good reason for abandoning my disbelief."

Now in the darkness, Lythande could make out the lines of a voluminous mage-robe cut like her own, deeply hooded; and in the folds of the mage-robe's hood, the pale blue burning outline of a star like the one that glowed between her own brows. She said, "If you know of any shelter against this possibly god-infested and ghost-harboring quarter, I will follow you to it."

Rajene's voice was a strong and resonant baritone; far deeper than the mellow and sexless contralto of Lythande's own, though perhaps equally musical. Across the back where Lythande's lute was strung, Ly-

thande could make out the outline of a *chitarrone*, an archaic but tuneful instrument almost as tall as the man who bore it. In fact, of all her fellow Adepts of the Blue Star, there were few Lythande would have rather met on a dark night; for as far as she knew, she had no quarrel with Rajene, and when they were fellow apprentices in the Temple of the Star, they had been friends — or as near to friends as any magician could come to friendship. Which is to say that at the least, they were not enemies.

Lythande had had no true friends there; had dared have none; for alone among all the Pilgrim Adepts from one end of Time to the other, Lythande was a woman; alone and in disguise she had penetrated the secrets of the temple, and only after she bore the Blue Star between her brows had her disguise been exposed. She had paid the highest price ever for the power of a Pilgrim Adept; for when the truth was known, the Master of the Star had laid a doom upon her, thus:

"Be then, forever, what you have chosen to be," he said, "For on that day when your true sex shall be proclaimed aloud to any man save myself, on that day is your power at an end, and your immunity from your fellows."

So it had been since that day; a life of perpetual concealment, without relief; an eternal solitude, with none but brief and superficial companion-

ship, such as she might now find for a time with Rajene.

And now, as if to add to the general bleakness of the deserted and ghost-haunted quarter, the faint mizzling rain began to come down harder into the darkness, blotting out even the semblance of any ordinary night.

Lythande was not altogether sorry; the faint grizzling rain of the past hours would create discomfort, but added nothing to the safety of the darkness; this sudden downpour would send any enterprising footpad or cutpurse back to shelter, or if desperate, would make it less likely that an assailant would identify the victim as a Pilgrim Adept. No sane thief would attempt to rob a magician of that stature; but in this darkness and rain, they might not be deterred.

Rajene tugged the hood of his mage-robe tighter over his head, trying to rearrange the folds to protect the musical instrument.

"Let us seek shelter," he said urgently "I have not visited these parts for many years — I forget quite how many; but if my memory still serves me at all, there was once an old dame who kept a kind of alchouse, and when her public-room was not too full, she would allow me to sleep on her floor by the fire. It was not the best shelter, but it was an inestimable improvement over the rain; and this is not such a night as I would willingly sleep under the stars — if there were any stars to sleep under, which there are not."

"Lead on," Lythande said briefly. "I follow."

This was better than she had hoped. She had little fear of women; and she had dwelt among the Adepts of the Blue Star for seven years of her apprenticeship without her true sex being even once suspected or exposed. A large public inn filled with men would have meant a night of endless vigilance; in the company of one fellow Pilgrim Adept and an old woman — and if Rajene's old acquaintance had been elderly in Rajene's early days as a magician, she must be truly venerable now — she would have little to fear.

She followed Rajene's shadowy form before her, with little light except the pallid glimmer of the Blue Star that shone faintly between her brows, and the similar gleam escaping from beneath Rajene's concealing hood.

She tried to protect her lute from the worst of the rain — not easy to do because the spell that kept it dry was a taxing one, and when she had concentrated on keeping up with Rajene in the darkness, she tended to lose sight of the spell. At worst it was more important that the lute be kept dry than that her own feet and body be sheltered from rain; they would dry without harm, and the lute would not.

After what seemed a long time of darkness and rain, stumbling on uneven ground broken with what might

have been old sunken gravestones, Lythande made out the dim lights of a cottage — an old and tumbledown building with sagging stone walls and a door of planks so old, split, and broken that the firelight streamed out between them. Sheltering out of the wind (which came around the corner of the building with howling violence), Lythande hugged her mage-robe close to her shoulders and thought that even if this place was deserted and the haunt of ghosts or even ghouls, she would have shelter this night from the rain.

From inside came the sound of a cracked and quavering voice; then the door was pulled open from inside and a stooped old woman stood in the firelight. She was dressed in faded rags and tatters, a much-patched shawl over her bent shoulders being almost more patch than shawl, her face so wrinkled and drawn that Lythande, who was herself immensely old, could not even begin to guess her age.

"Dame Lura," cried Rajene, "I rejoice to see that you still dwell in this world! I have brought a friend to beg shelter at your fire this night. Had you no longer dwelled here, I was prepared to spend this wild night begging shelter of some poor ghost in his tomb!"

Dame Lura chuckled, a sound that seemed to Lythande so wild and humorless that it was hardly human.

"Ah, Rajene, my friend, there is better shelter than that for you here;

even if this were no better than a tomb, I would deny shelter neither to the living nor the dead on such a night as this. Come inside; dry yourselves by the fire there." She gestured them to the hearth, where a large rug covered the cold stone, and stretched out on the stone lay two large dogs: hairy and shaggy, sound asleep with their noses to the fire.

Rajene shoved one — the nearer dog, black and shaggy — with his foot, and the animal made a sleepy grumbling sound without waking, and scooted a little to one side to make room for Rajene to shed the mage-robe and hang it over a rickety stool that stood at the edge of the hearth-rug. After a moment, Lythande did the same, boosting another stool to the fireside and hauling off the half-drenched mage-robe. Rajene sat between the dogs, stretching his stockinged feet to the fire, and drew the *chitarrone* to himself, tuning the instrument to make certain it had taken no harm. Lythande pulled off her boots, stretching her narrow feet to the fire. The smaller of the two dogs, a tan and shaggy long-haired bitch, crowded against her, but the animal was warm and friendly, and after all, it had a better right to the fire than she did.

Dame Lura pulled a huge caldron from its crane over the fire and asked, "May I offer ye some supper? And will ye play me a tune on yer lutes?"

"Pleasure," muttered Rajene, and

began to play an old ballad of the countryside. Lythande discovered that the strings of her lute were soaked with the rain; but she had spare lengths of gut stowed in the many pockets of the mage-robe; she fumbled in them and set about mending and replacing the strings.

The old woman scooped a ladleful of stew into each of a couple of coarsely carved wood bowls and held one bowl out to Lythande. It smelled delicious, and Lythande, seeing that Rajene was looking into the fire and not at her, ventured a couple of bites. One of the many vows fencing the power of a Pilgrim Adept was that she might neither be seen to eat nor drink in the sight of any man; but the vows did not apply to women, and Rajene was not looking at her. She chose to apply the prohibition quite literally and hastily. While Rajene was bent over his lute and tuning it, she managed to get down a good part of the stew; though when he raised his eyes and asked her to play, she at once left off eating.

"No, you play; I am not familiar with the sound of the *chitarrone*," she asked. He seemed gratified by the request, and again bent his face over the lute so that Lythande managed to finish the stew. After that, Lythande played and sang, but soon began to feel sleepy close to the fire; covered herself with the mage-robe, which also covered the dogs; and tumbled quickly into sleep. Her last awareness

was of the strong smell of wet dog hair, and of Rajene snoring on the rug beside her.

When she woke, she was aware of the firelight and silence; she looked up and saw no sign of Rajene, but only the large dog stretched out on the hearth. Then, about to stretch out, she looked at her hand and her hand was not there — only a hairy tan paw extended toward the fire. Something was wrong with her perspective; she seemed closer to the fire than before. She sprang up, trying to cry out, and heard only a long, lugubrious howl. At the sound the other dog sprang up, barking wildly; and above the dog's low, hairy forehead, she saw a pale gleam of blue in the shape of a star. She *recognized* the other dog; it was Rajene. And she herself had somehow been transformed into the bitch lying beside her on the rug.

Dame Lura still crouched over her caldron, muttering in some unknown language — or was it only that Lythande could no longer understand human speech? Lythande rushed in panic for the door, on all fours, followed by the other dog who was Rajene.

Outside, it had stopt raining; and by a curious distorted moonlight, she raced through the deserted lands; stumbling over gravestones, Rajene racing after her.

Transformed by sorcery; and since

I have become a bitch, Rajene will know I am a woman, she thought, and wondered why she was thinking about that; trapped in animal form, she could not even speak a spell to break the enchantment. Or was this the kind of spell that lasted only until sunrise or moonset? But why had nothing warned her of magic in action? The Blue Star should have warned her of the presence of sorcery. Yet in all justice she realized that the unaccustomed warmth after a cold soaking, the hot food, and her attempt to eat unobserved had taken her mind from any thought of hostile magic.

She wondered for a moment if Rajene had betrayed her. No, he himself was victim of the same magic; they had blundered together into the spell.

Rajene was still racing away in panic; Lythande tried to call out to him, but heard only a curious whining growl and desisted almost at once.

Can this be only a dream? Can it be that I am still lying before the fire in the witch's cottage, dreaming this? she wondered; but the chill of the graveyard was penetrating the pads on her paws, and there was no change in the dream-surroundings; so this was no dream, but some vicious sorcerous reality, and she — as well as Rajene — was trapped inside it.

Rajene — or rather, the dog in whose consciousness Rajene now dwelt — stopped his headlong rush, and turned back toward her, whining pitifully and circling around, barking

softly. Then he stopped and whimpered, stretching himself out as if he were trying to crawl with shame into the very ground.

Lythande's thoughts were now wholly concerned with the spell into which she had blundered; and how she could get out of this. There were magical herbs that grew in the shadow of the gallows; perhaps she could find one that would break the spell. The problem was that she had no particular belief in the efficacy of that kind of spell. Nevertheless, under these circumstances she found her disbelief eroding away; it evidently made a difference which side of the spell you were on.

She looked round, trying to orient herself from the peculiar perspective of a dog's vision; her eyesight was excellent, but everything seemed very high up and she was afraid of stumbling over the gravestones. The long shadow of the gallows still dominated the wasteland, and she went closer; she smelled the faint bitterness and found the herb for which she was looking, the threefold shiny leaf and pale berry, colorless by moonlight — although by normal day and in normal sight, it might have been pale green. She bent to nibble the herb; she knew from experience that it was faintly bitter, like most herbs; but when her sharp dog's teeth bruised the leaf, it was intense, nauseating, releasing a harsh, violent oil that flooded her with such sickness that

she reflexively spat it out.

So much for that. Dogs didn't eat herbs — she should have remembered that. They sometimes ate grass when they were sick, but evidently sorcery did not qualify as an illness.

She tried to bite at the ordinary grass to take the taste of the herb out of her mouth; the grass tasted bland and coarse, like tasteless lettuce. What next? She recalled an ancient superstition; if she circled seven times clockwise round the gallows . . . or was it counterclockwise? Well, she would try it seven times clockwise; and if that had no effect, she would try it seven times counterclockwise; and if *that* had no effect — well, she would have to think of something else.

But Rajene — to her amazement, she saw that the larger dog was bounding around the gallows and actually frisking his tail — had already thought of that. She followed, but nothing happened; as she began her eighth circumambulation of the gallows, she stopped and reversed the direction.

But nothing happened. *We could keep this up all night; dogs probably would.* She scowled — it distorted her vision oddly because her hairy forehead was at such an odd angle to her eyes — and flung herself down on the grass to think of any other possibility.

There must be something else that they could try. She turned about to

look for Dame Lura's cottage. If she went back and confronted the hag, threatened to tear out her throat, the damnable hag would probably consent to take off her spell.

But she could see not the smallest glimmer of light from the witch's fire; she thought (but was not sure) that she could see the outline of the cottage, but it was entirely dark; the hag must have doused her fires and gone to bed, as if the enchanting of two wizards were just part of a good night's work. In a rage, Lythande thought, *Let me get my hands — my paws — on her, and if I don't make it the worst night's work she ever did, my name is not Lythande.*

Reversing her direction, she went bounding over uneven grass and gravestones toward the faraway dark outline of the cottage. Then she stopped; her acutely keen hearing in dog form sensed a movement on the grass not too far away; she stopped to allow Rajene to come up with her; she could hear him panting with his tongue hanging out.

The movement advanced, and a shadow loomed over her: a robed ure. A wizard? No, some kind of priest. His sacred staff was extended. Rajene jumped up and gripped the staff between his teeth. The priest cried out in surprise as the staff clattered to the gravestones. As Lythande touched it, she felt a shudder run through her limbs, and stretching, rose easily to her feet. The priest was

gaping, reaching for his staff.

"A thousand pardons," Rajene said easily. "And as many thanks, for you have released us from an evil enchantment."

The priest gathered up his staff, with an exclamation of astonishment. Rajene was wearing a loose whitish pajamalike garment; Lythande was dressed in leather tunic and breeches, and her feet were bare and cut on the loose stones and gravestones. Limping, she bowed to the priest, saying gravely, "Lythande thanks you, priest."

"Er — my pleasure to be of service," said the priest uneasily. "But tell me, how and when did all this happen? I did not know that this deserted quarter was subject to enchantments."

"Obviously we did not either," said Lythande, and Rajene added, "I thought I was visiting an old friend; I think now it must have been a ghost or evil fiend in her shape."

"An old friend living hereabouts?" asked the priest. "But my good man, no one dwells in this quarter."

"Dame Lura's cottage," Rajene said. "And I must return there—"

"But my good fellow," the priest began to argue, then, at Rajene's grim stare, subsided and followed him as he set out toward the outline of the cottage. "It is fortunate I came along; I was going out to greet the sun from that hill yonder. I visit this necropolis only once in a year, on the anniversary of the death of my old great-aunt; I come to say a prayer for her, for she

was good to me in her own way, though I fear she was a wicked woman. This was that selfsame Dame Lura your companion claims to have seen—"

"*Claims* be damned," said Lythande. "Dame Lura sheltered us by her fire last night, and fed us with a stew that led to this enchantment."

"But my good man, that is simply impossible," said the priest, and followed them as they approached the dark line of the cottage. It was beginning to get light now, and she could clearly make out the familiar line of the odd peaked roof, though no light showed through the dilapidated planks of the door.

Rajene banged on the door, then shouted; silence. Then he shoved the door open.

Inside by the growing light, they could clearly see that the cabin was empty. No fire, no dogs, no rug where the dogs had lain; only bare stone flooring, and lying on the floor, two mage-robcs, Lythande's lute, and the broken-stringed *chitarrone*.

"I suppose we should be glad for this," said Lythande, picking up the lute; she shrugged the mage-robe around her shoulders and felt less vulnerable, though the priest no more than any other man could have identified her lean, breastless figure as that of a woman. The spare strings of the lute were untouched in her pocket, the packet still sealed, yet she remembered mending and restring-

ing the lute while she sat between the dogs on the hearth-rug.

Rajene, dressing slowly in his own mage-robe, looked angry, the Blue Star gleaming between his scowling brows. He went to the hearth, where the great caldron still hung on its crane; inside the caldron was cold and empty, yet Lythande could still in memory taste the stew she had eaten.

"I told you so," said the priest with a smug injured air. "Dame Lura died on yonder gallows fifty years ago this night."

Lythande turned her back on the empty cottage and began to walk swiftly away; she could clearly see now in the frost the footprints of two dogs, running this way, then abruptly her own human footprints and Rajene's coming to the cottage. After a moment, Rajene caught up with her.

"I gave the priest two silver pieces," he said. "Even though he disenchanted us by accident, I am grateful."

Lythande fumbled in her pockets and handed him a silver coin. "I will share the fee," she said.

"Even so, we were lucky," Rajene said. "We encountered no bitches. I have no sons; and if I did, they might well be sons of bitches; but I would prefer that they be so metaphorically rather than literally, if you take my meaning."

So he had not even noticed — or if he did, had thought Lythande assumed the other dog's shape out of default.

"If I had had a son," Lythande said, trying to make her voice casual, "I would prefer that he be not a cur. Nevertheless, Rajene, I knew when we dwelt in the Temple of the Blue Star that you were a real son of a bitch. And now I can prove it."

The sun was coming up; Rajene looked at her and laughed. He said,

"Let's find a tavern — and a pot of ale. I wish I knew what was in that stew."

Lythande said, "I'm sure we're better off not knowing."

"Let's go," said Rajene. "Last one to the city gates is a dirty dog."

"Right," said Lythande, thinking, *That's one expression I'll never use again.*



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Installment 21: *In Which You And A Large Group Of Total Strangers Are Flipped The Finger By The Mad Masters Of Anthropomorphism*

If this afternoon you are walking down the street and some geek in a window three storeys above you decides to be cute, and s/he dumps a paper bag full of turds into the abyss, and as you pass beneath you get slimed from head to toe with ka-ka, and you look up and scream at the sonofabitch, and s/he gives you the finger, I'd be willing to make book that you'd register about 9.6 on the Pissed-Off Scale.

If you picked up today's paper and read where Reagan and his cronies had managed to push through a hundred and fifteen million to aid the Contras, but were trying to reduce the aid to retarded children from 9% (which is what it is, though it was supposed to have been 14% and then go as high as 30%, but they never quite got around to doing it) to 7½%, and they tried to con you by telling you we had to do it because of the Domino Effect in Latin America that would permit the Communist Menace to gain a toehold in this hemisphere, I'd put good money on your responding with outrage and a verbal explosion of naughty words.

If you go out to dinner tonight and a car full of no-neck spuds pulls up alongside you at a traffic light, and the feeps inside look across at the



HARLAN ELLISON'S Watching

one you love, sitting beside you, and yell, "Hey, that is the ugliest piece of crap I've ever seen, I hacked up something prettier than that when I got drunk on Friday, it looks like something I fished outta the sink disposal this morning!" I'd bet my paycheck for this column that your first instinct would be to deck it as you leave the light and centerpunch those dirtballs into a better life.

Yet by the time you read these words many of you (and many of your friends) (and a large group of total strangers all across these great Yew-nited States) will have shelled out as much as six bucks a head to sit through FLIGHT OF THE NAVIGATOR (Walt Disney Pictures), and I'll take odds not one of you took sufficient offense at having had your intelligence insulted, at having been flipped the bird by Disney's head of production, Michael Eisner, by director Randal Kleiser (the man who gave you *Grease*, *The Blue Lagoon*, *Summer Lovers* and *Grandview, U.S.A.*, four of the dreariest films of the past eight years, despite having made indecent amounts of money, thereby guaranteeing Mr. Kleiser unlimited shots at your insipience threshold), and by a trio of writers named Baker, Burton and MacManus whose first names ought to be Larry, Shemp and Moe, that you rose up in wrath and demanded your money back. Go ahead, tell me that you felt so damned affronted by *Flight of the Navigator*

that you nailed the poor theater manager's head to the candy counter. Tell me you felt as used as you did after seeing *The Secret of Al Capone's Vaults*; that you knew to the core of your being that once and for all you weren't going to have the Hollywood Crap Mill stick it to you and break it off inside. Go to it; tell me: I'll believe anything; hell, I'm just a critic, not one of the Great Wad that goes to these abominations and doesn't understand that it's had its pockets picked. And then I'll tell you that pigs can fly, and we'll start even.

What I'm trying to say is that *Flight of the Navigator* is just awful. It has absolutely nothing to recommend it. From a plot that has approximately half as much logic as a Creationist tract to a nauseating passion for anthropomorphizing every machine that they can flog across the screen, this no-brainer is an insult to anything crawling across our planet with the vaguest scintilla of a claim to sentience.

Navigator combines the worst elements of *Explorers*, *Short Circuit*, *Goonies* and *The Last Starfighter*, with treacly homages to those early Disney True-Life Adventures in which all manner of flora and fauna were imbued with human characteristics.

No.

I've had it.

I can bear no more. This time I was going to inveigh once again about the juvenilizing of our beloved cine-

matic art-form, lamenting the horrors visited upon Ridley Scott's *Legend* and comparing it to *Labyrinth* (which, like *Return to Oz*, was never given a fair shake by the press or the critical *aparatchiks*); I was going to conclude with stunning summation the theses advanced in the last two or three columns, using as ghastly examples *The Manhattan Project*, *Ladyhawke*, *Sword of the Valiant* (aka *Gawain and the Green Knight*) *Space Camp*, *D.A.R.Y.L.* and all the limping, lurching, broken-backed, blind in one eye, illogicalities I've savaged here these past months, from *Gremlins* to *Young Sherlock Holmes* . . . but I'm simply not up to it. I've been receiving letters from many of you, pleading for respite. Agreeing, with sobs and defeated expressions, that this has been a period of assault on our tolerance for the imperfect unparalleled in moviemaking history; an assault that makes the dreadful indulgences of Pee Wee Herman (whose voice, you will learn here for the first time, was used as that of Max, the sentient spaceship, in *Navigator*) seem by comparison to be of a stature with the thespic joys of Sirs Gielgud, Olivier and Richardson. Pleading for a brief break from the shrieks of anguish I let out every time one of these spikes is driven into my critic's perception. And at last, finally, I agree. I can say no more for a while. There is apparently no bottoming-out of this trend toward imbecile filmmaking.

Every week brings new and more loathesome product; and at last even I am unhorsed.

So I will toss out all my notes on those films.

Happily will I heave a sigh of relief (and do I hear an echo from out there where you lie on your back gasping for surcease?) and let those ear-wigs, maggots, cockroaches and gnats live their brief lives in your theaters, never again to be available for swatting if you're smart and don't watch them on cable television.

I will go to another insect, with high recommendations. I will tell you that if you missed David Cronenberg's remake of *THE FLY* (20th Century Fox), you missed one of the most exciting motion pictures of the year. Unlike *Invaders From Mars*, which began with dreck from its first version in 1953, and was recently remade in an updated, equally as *dreck*-oid version, *The Fly* uses lovingly-remembered but nonetheless trivial material — the 1958 "Help me! Help me!" version and two abominable sequels (1959 & 1965) — to form a basis for Cronenberg's latest installment in his celluloid tract on the concept of the New Flesh.

What's that? A new filmic philosophy? Something we can buzz a word at? Oh, ripping, we all say . . . lay it on us, Oh Observer of Pop Art.

And I will. Next time. I want to discuss Cronenberg at length, because I've been sorta muttering for several

years that of all the wise guy directors currently assaulting us, only Cronenberg has leapfrogged his own triumphs and failures to become a director/writer with a voice and a view of the world that could be as important, in its own bizarre way, as that of Hitchcock, Ford, Wilder or Woody Allen.

But I need space for such a discussion, and next time I will allocate that space for myself, The Omnipresent Ferman permitting.

And until then, go to see Coppola's PEGGY SUE GOT MARRIED (Tri-Star), written by Jerry Leichtling and Arlene Sarner, which is what *Back to the Future* wanted to be. It is almost exactly the same story, told from the viewpoint of a woman, rather than that of a simpy, affected, smartass Michael J. Fox; it is time travel and wish-fulfillment treated maturely, rather than simplistically and for yocks; it is adult and sincere and entertaining and everything right that *Back to the Future* did wrong. When I sat in that Hugo awards audience in Atlanta last Labor Day, and saw *Back to the Future* beat out *Brazil* for the statuette, I felt my heart sink. It was a travesty, and in that moment I hated those of you who voted for best film, con-

demning you in my mind to nothing better than *Back to the Future*. Ever!

But even the most benumbed of you must gleam in the eye of the universe, for you have been given a chance to see the error of your ways. It has been given to you, the possibility of actually comparing what-was with what-might-be. You can go to the theater and see *Peggy Sue Got Married*, waltz up the street to the video shoppe to rent *Back to the Future*, take it home, and compare — while the memory of *Peggy Sue* is still fresh — idiocy and counterfeit emotion and cheap laughs and adolescent bullshit with a mature dream entertainingly spun at proper length.

I cannot recommend *Peggy Sue Got Married* highly enough. I only hope when you make the comparison, that you have not been so hornswoggled that you cannot perceive the quantum leap in excellence and honesty between them.

Having now attempted to do some social work among the artistically impoverished, I go away to regain that sweetness of nature I once possessed, before having been slimed by ka-ka for what seems an eternity.

Hoping you are the same. . .



Andrew Greeley is the author of eight novels including The Cardinal Sins, Thy Brother's Wife, Angels of September and, more recently, God Game, his first science fiction/fantasy novel. He is a Professor of Sociology at the University of Arizona, a priest of the Archdiocese of Chicago, and a weekly columnist for The Chicago Sun Times. In "Ghost Town," his first story for F & SF, he tells an eerie tale of loneliness, separation and the supernatural.

The Dutchman's Ghost Town

BY

ANDREW M. GREELEY

The first time I saw her, in the railroad station café in Tucson, I thought she was a ghost.

Bing Crosby was singing "Old Buttermilk Sky" on a wheezy jukebox.

"She's dead." It was a fleeting impression, recorded in a brain dazed by habitual depression, a lifetime of bizarre romantic fantasy, and a night long drive across the desert: milk-white skin, pale blue eyes, slender ethereal body slipping through the chairs and the tables with a heavy cardboard piece of luggage in one hand. She approached the counter and sat down across from me so quietly that no one seemed to notice her. She had to order her coffee twice before the waitress was aware that she was sitting at the counter.

She looks like she's from beyond the grave, I thought, and then tried again to dismiss the impression.

She was too young and too pretty to be a ghost, I told myself. Ghosts don't have dark red hair shaped like a crisp halo around their high, intelligent foreheads. They don't have gracefully swelling breasts, and they don't move lithe young bodies with unselfconscious grace.

Why not? my gloomy imagination wondered.

She laid a dime on the sloppy counter next to the coffee cup that had been slapped down in front of her with such vigor that some of the dismal liquid splashed into the saucer.

Why can't ghosts be gorgeous? I asked myself, not quite ready to give up my grotesque fantasy. I was driving from San Diego to Chicago in one last romantic binge before I settled down to college and law school and River Forest affluence. What would be more appropriate than to meet a

pretty ghost on the first leg of the trip?

From the perspective of four decades, I can understand why someone would think I was asking for trouble.

"It's fifteen cents." The slovenly waitress wiped the counter indifferently with a dirty towel.

It was already hot in the station. My guidebook said that in summer the usual thirty-degree variation in Tucson temperatures continued — between eighty and 110. And during the monsoon, it added helpfully, humidity added to the discomfort caused by the heat. Monsoons, I thought, happened in India. And whoever heard of a humid desert?

I had a lot to learn about this country I was exploring for the first and probably the last time.

The young woman reached into her worn purse and almost furtively searched for another coin. She withdrew a second dime, one of the tarnished "war dimes," and laid it next to the first. The waitress scooped them both up and replaced them with a nickel.

An elegant hand reached out to reclaim the nickel and then, it seemed to me shamefully, retreated, leaving the tip for the waitress, who would certainly not be grateful.

Sexual desire, which had deserted me somewhere between Hollandia and Okinawa Jima, made a faint, furtive, and very tentative reappearance.

She was dead tired, lonely, a little frightened, and broke.

I had ten crisp hundred-dollar bills in my wallet and a checkbook that could duplicate that many times over. Perhaps I could help.

Her brown skirt and white blouse were wrinkled — all night in coach — and shabby. The leather on her low-heeled shoes was cracked. Her hair was rumpled. Yet she drank the coffee, black the way it should be, with natural elegance. And she was young, painfully, desperately young. Certainly not twenty yet, which from the heights of my almost twenty-four made her virtually a child.

With a child's innocence softening the lines of weariness on her gently curving face. And a hint of pain no child ought to have suffered.

Four decades later I can still feel the sting of need that accompanied my sentiments of tenderness.

Then I saw the thin gold wedding band, little more than Woolworth jewelry. To my shame it must be confessed that recognition had no impact on my sexual longing.

"Your husband in the service?"

Startled, she glanced around, uncertain that I was speaking to her.

"He was on the *Indianapolis*."

A sentence of death. No wonder the terrible pain in her soft blue eyes.

"I'm sorry."

She nodded, accepting my sympathy. "I hope he died on the ship before the sharks got to them."

"What did he do?" Navy talk to cover the awkwardness and the sorrow. Somehow my intentions became, if not completely honorable, at least more respectable than they had been.

"Radar. He said that electronics training" — she reached into her purse — "would guarantee a job after the war. Even better than civil service." She opened a cheap wallet to show me his picture. A towhead in high school graduation pose. "He was only nineteen."

"Classmate?"

"Year ahead. I was a junior when I married him."

Just barely legal age. In some states. Probably had not graduated from high school.

"I'm sorry." What else could I say?

"What kind of plane did you fly?"

It was my turn to be startled. How did she know that I was a pilot?

"F6F."

"Hellcat. What ship?"

"*Enterprise*."

She raised an auburn eyebrow. The Big E was a legend. "Lieutenant?"

I spread my hands in fake humility. "Gold oak-leaf type."

She smiled, and Tucson disappeared for a couple of moments. "Impressive."

"Survival."

I wanted to tell her everything. She would understand. I hated the killing and the dying. I missed my friends who had crashed into the Pacific — Saipan, Leyte, Yap, all those other

places that had even now blurred in my memory. But I also missed the roar of engines, the surge of power as my Grumann lifted off the deck, the sky dark with our fleets of planes, the excitement of battle, the triumph of return, the firecrack of the arresting gear as I touched down on the deck, then the horror of counting noses. . . .

"A trip across the country before you settle down?"

"And begin to grow old." Did she read minds?

"Real old-timer." She smiled again; her teeth were fine and even, like her delicate facial bones. She was a natural beauty, needing neither makeup nor expensive clothes to strike at your heart.

"The war made us all grow up too soon," I pushed aside my plate of soggy pancakes. "I wish . . . I don't know what I wish."

"I wish" — she finished her coffee — "I had my husband back."

"Let me buy you a real breakfast." I stood up from the counter and walked around to the other side.

"That isn't necessary." She clutched her purse. "I'm not hungry."

I picked up her suitcase. Heavy, probably all her worldly goods. "Yes, you are. I don't have any . . . well, bad ideas."

She considered me very carefully, her eyes probing at my soul like a doctor's exploring scalpel. "You do, too, Commander, but you won't act

on them, will you?"

"Not at the breakfast table."

"Nor with an enlisted man's widow. All right, sir." Yet another smile. "I'll admit I'm starved."

Four times she had read my mind. I thought it odd, but not frightening, much less dangerous. Only later would I try to fit it into the whole strange picture of Andrea King, if that really was her name.

We walked up Sixth Street and turned into Congress. Tucson was not much more than a small town in those days: thirty thousand people, according to an old almanac I checked while I was thinking about this story. East of the railway there were blocks of adobe homes, slums for Mexicans. In the other direction stretched neat lines of bungalows with withered grass lawns — home designs transplanted from New England or the Middle West. Why would anyone want to live in this furnace? I wondered. Humid furnace at that. As I drove in at sunrise on highway 86, I passed the sleepy redbrick University of Arizona. It would be on the bottom of my list.

Yet the desert mountains all around — the Catalinas looming to the north, the lofty Santa Ritas on the south, the Tanque Verdes to the east, and the Tucson Mountains to the west — held my attention: barren desert mountains, not a bit like Fuji. But American mountains, thank God. And hence dear to a man who had decided after Yap that he would never

live to see America again.

The hotel was better than the railroad station. The tables were clean, the service friendly and polite, and a primitive form of air-conditioning was huffing away.

"This town will never amount to much." I held the chair for her.

"Until they put air-conditioning in every home."

"That will never happen."

"How can people live in brick homes in this weather?" I sat next to her and picked up the menu.

"Did you notice the homes with the walls all around them? I suppose that's the Spanish emphasis on 'privacy.'"

"You wouldn't have to wear much behind those walls."

"I bet they do."

She ordered orange juice, bacon and eggs, pancakes, and coffee and demolished the meal with quiet efficiency.

"Not hungry, huh?"

"Very hungry, Commander."

"Jerry. You're . . . ?"

"Andrea. Andrea King. Where are you going next?"

"Down to Colossal Cave and over to Tombstone, then up to Phoenix, probably by way of the Superstition Mountains."

"What are those?"

"Where the Lost Dutchman Mine is supposed to be. I'm curious."

"Yes, I know. Is that any relation to the Flying Dutchman?"

"Who's he?"

"An opera about a sea captain who is doomed to roam the world forever without ever finding port."

"I don't know much about opera."

But she did. And she hadn't graduated from high school.

I told her the Lost Dutchman legend. She did not seem much interested.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"Phoenix. I know someone who thinks she can find me a job. Waiting on tables in one of the winter resorts. They call it the Arizona Biltmore."

"Can I give you a ride?"

"I don't think. . ." She considered me again, even more cautiously, over a fork of syrup-drenched pancake. "That would be very nice. I don't have much money."

I was not a total innocent. She should have insurance and a pension. But the Navy Department was slow. She'd run out of the money she'd saved from John's family allowance, which had been sent routinely while he was still alive.

I didn't pry. It was none of my business why she had left San Diego or why she had been unable to find a job there. And the questions I asked about her background were gently deflected. She was from "the East"; she didn't have any family; she didn't know what she would do with her life. Probably try to finish school when she had saved some more money. No, of course she didn't mind if we de-

toured to the Cave and Tombstone before driving up to Phoenix. The job, she had been told, was waiting for her whenever she came.

A thin but not improbable story. I was not inclined to question it. An hour before, I had been an ex-naval officer struggling with depression and wondering what point there could be in the rest of my life. Now I had a beautiful young woman to protect and care for.

At almost twenty-four that is enough. Even if the young woman is smarter than she has any right to be.

And even if there is something just a little strange, almost uncanny about her.

That's the right word. Uncanny. Andrea King was not quite of this world. In the back of my head, even then I think I knew that. I did not want to pay any attention to what I knew.

I glanced at the *Arizona Star* on the newsstand in the hotel lobby. "Seventy-Six Die in Jerusalem Hotel Blast!" I bought the paper. Zionist terrorists had blown up the King David Hotel. I no longer asked when the killing would finally stop. I knew it would never stop.

"Why did they give you the Navy Cross?" she asked as we walked into the thick, soggy curtain of heat on Congress Street.

"Philippine Sea. I saved some TBFs that were in trouble. Zeros."

"Does that help?"

"Some American women are not widows — if the TBF men made it through the rest of the war. Some Japanese women are."

Immediately I regretted the harshness of my reply. It did not, however, seem to bother her.

"We didn't start the war."

We turned down Stone, almost as though she knew where my 1939 Chevy (\$799 FOB Detroit) was parked.

"I guess" — she tilted her head to glance at me ruefully — "that I'm a petty good guesser."

She stopped next to the battered blue car before I did.

"Damn good guesser."

"Only car on the street." She laughed for the first time, a pure, open laugh that hinted that long ago she might have been the life of the sophomore hops at her high school.

A long, long time ago.

"Yeh, but you knew the street."

She laughed again and waited till I opened the door for her. "Thank you."

Nuns, I thought. Catholic high school. I bet they expelled her when they found out she was married. Pregnant? Lost a child?

I rolled down the window of the Chevy and turned to the sports section. The Cubs had lost again. A long way down from the World Series last year. Then the comics. Terry and the Pirates. Smilin' Jack, Dick Tracy.

I looked up. Andrea was smiling at me, a mother watching a funny little

baby. Navy Cross and Smilin' Jack. I suppose it was funny.

Her smile quickly faded. "I had a miscarriage after John sailed. I don't know whether my letter ever caught up with him. I hope it didn't."

"I'm sorry."

She nodded again.

"God provides, Andrea," I said weakly.

"It's not God I'm worried about."

We took the Benson road out of Tucson, across the harsh brown desert.

"My guidebook says that this was all cattle country till the end of the last century. Tombstone folded up because the silver mines flooded and the ranchland dried up."

She nodded, a favorite gesture, conveying appropriately different reactions. God, she was lovely. I was glad that she would be with me for the day.

"Did you work in San Diego?"

A waitress at the Del Coronado Hotel after it reopened. She was not very good at it. Couldn't concentrate. Too many memories. Too much navy. She thought she should start over somewhere else. They had been very nice to her, but she couldn't exist forever on pity.

"I used to drink there occasionally. I'm sure I would have remembered you."

"After how many drinks?" Her laugh, I decided was pure magic.

"Touché. But you are the kind I

would remember, even drunk."

"If we're going to exchange compliments, Commander, I think I would remember you, too."

Young and innocent, but somehow experienced and wise. I thought I might just be falling in love with Andrea King.

And I would have remembered her if I had seen her at the Coronado.

So I didn't say much on the road to Tombstone. Just short of Benson, U.S. 80 branches off from Arizona 86 and heads due south. We slowed down to twenty-five miles an hour on the outskirts of St. David.

"Mormon town." I glanced over at her. She seemed far, far away from southern Arizona.

"Tell me about Tombstone," She shivered. "It's a frightening name."

I told her about the Earps and the Clantons, and the McClurys and the gunfight in 1881, all memorized from my guidebook.

"How terrible."

Tombstone was even less impressive then than it is now. Wyatt Earp had yet to become a TV hero, and the old town had yet to discover it could squeeze a few extra dollars a year from tourism. I pulled up in front of the "Post Office Café" on main street.

"Want another cup of coffee?"

She was staring out the window, seeing neither the Post Office Café, nor 1946 Tombstone.

"Andrea?" I said gently, touching

her arm, the first of what I was beginning to hope would be many touches.

"I'm sorry. . . . What did you say?"

"Do you want a cup of coffee before we do the O.K. Corral?"

"No. . . . Commander . . . uh, Jerry . . . do you mind if I stay in the car? I'm afraid of this place."

She huddled against the door; her body was tense, her face tight with fear.

"It's just an old western ghost town." I took her hand.

"Please."

"Of course."

The O.K. Corral was a disappointment — just a yard next to a house. Reality so much blander than story. But I explored Tombstone with a singing heart. A new challenge had entered my life to replace war, just as war had replaced flight training and chemistry and basketball. Pretty, haunted young women were, I told myself, the best excitement yet.

She was still crouched against the door, now reading a book. *All the King's Men*.

"Good book?"

"Very. About politics and corruption. I'm sorry if I disappointed you."

"The sights on this tour are an option. We'll get you to Phoenix 'fore sundown, ma'am."

"Silly."

She was still terrified.

Colossal Cave did not help any. If anything, the entrance frightened her

more than the streets of Tombstone.

"I can't go in there. I'd die."

She sounded like she meant it.

"You don't mind waiting?"

"Of course not."

The cave was dark and slimy and disappointing.

"Not very scary at all," I said as I climbed back into the car.

"I would have died," she repeated, as she closed the book and laid it next to her — and between us — on the front seat. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It's nice to have someone waiting."

She didn't smile or nod. Still scared.

She did get out of the car at the old St. Xavier mission — the "white dove of the desert" — and walked into the church with me. She fell on her knees in the back of the dark nave and prayed fervently — like someone pursued by demons, I thought. Outside she pleaded to be excused from visiting the tiny cemetery next to the church and scurried back into the steaming car.

"What frightens you?" I tried to keep my voice soft and reassuring as I started the old Chevy.

"Everything."

I didn't pursue the matter.

As we drove away from the mission, she grabbed my arm — for the first time, and I hoped not the last. "Those clouds over the mountains!"

Great black clouds were piling up behind the Catalinas; huge, ugly,

threatening thunderheads building up strength for a mad rush down the side of the mountains and the foothills and a slashing attack on Tucson.

"I'd hate to have to fly though them. But they're only thunderstorms. Typical late afternoon phenomenon here."

Her fingers dug into my arm. "Please. . . ."

I pulled over to the side of the road and turned off the ignition. "Please what, Andrea?"

She turned her head and looked at me sorrowfully, tears forming in her eyes. "Please . . . do we have to drive through them?"

"Not if you don't want to."

"Leave me at the bus station. I'll go to Phoenix tomorrow."

"Do you really think I would do that?"

Her stiletto eyes considered my soul again. "No."

"There's a wonderful old resort on the edge of the city called the Arizona Inn. We could swim and have a decent meal. . . . I forgot about lunch, didn't I? . . . Separate rooms, Andrea King, different wings of the inn."

"I trust you. . . ." She hesitated. "I'm not proud enough to say 'no' to a place where I can take a shower. . . ."

"I'm thoroughly trustworthy." I patted her arm and started the car.

"Not thoroughly, but sufficiently," she laughed through her tears. "I'm sorry that I'm being a nuisance."

"I'm not."

Later, when the storm had swept through Tucson, leaving big puddles on the street outside the Arizona Inn, I walked into the swimming pool area, a copy of the *Tucson Citizen* under my arm. Had to read the evening comics, too.

Andrea King was already in the pool. She was neither a strong nor a skillful swimmer, but she cut through the water with the grace that characterized everything she did.

I sat down in a deck chair and opened the paper, waiting eagerly for her to climb out of the pool. In a swimsuit, she would be sumptuous.

And she was even more than that. Her rich, full womanly body, encased in a white, corsetlike, strapless suit, demanded to be embraced and loved.

A demand that I resisted with the mental note that my long vacation from sexual feelings was certainly over.

"You take my breath away," I admitted as she spread out a towel and sat on the tiles next to my chair. The loudspeaker played "Tenderly," then "How Are Things in Gloccomorra?" — just for us.

"A cliché, Commander, but thank you anyway. . . . This is a lovely place. So few people. Summer, I suppose. That man looked like he thought you were crazy when you insisted on separate wings."

"Maybe I am."

"Not really." She shook water out

of her hair. "Reading comics?"

"Almost illiterate."

"You are NOT."

She leaned forward, arms around her legs, tops of her wondrous breasts pushed against the swimsuit.

"I want to live, Commander."

"I should hope so." I touched her shoulder, still wet from the pool. Her fingers took possession of mine, not so much to fend them off as to hold them.

"If I were better educated, I could say it more clearly. . . . Now don't tell me I'm smart. I know that. But I'm still uneducated. . . . I wanted to die. I still want to die most of the time. But inside me there's something stronger that tells me I want to live, something as powerful as the ocean or the sky."

"Will to live. . . ."

"I suppose. I've thought about killing myself." Her hand relinquished mine and her fists knotted fiercely. "I've given up so often. John . . . the baby. But I can't and I won't and it's almost not up to me. . . . Do I make any sense?"

"Yes."

What would have happened if I had taken her into my arms then? I'll never know. Not that it matters.

"I won't give up. I won't quit."

"I know that."

"And you're thinking about how much fun it would be to take off my swimsuit. . . ."

"I am NOT!" I felt my face flame, because of course I was.

"Yes, you are and that's all right, too. Except that wet suits are not so easy to remove. Now do your swimming and cool off."

So in the fading daylight, while she finished Robert Penn Warren's book (which she had started in Tombstone), I struggled through a half mile and wondered who she was.

And why, despite living in San Diego for a couple of years, her skin was so pale.

At supper she wore a sleeveless white dress, matching white shoes, nylons, and a tiny gold cross at her neck. There was, I suspected, an iron buried in her cardboard luggage.

The wedding band was still on her finger.

We ate steak and pan-fried potatoes and drank red wine and laughed like two people who were falling in love ought to laugh. I have no recollection of what we said, so it could not have been of any moment. She was, I thought, a charming dinner companion. I had about made up my mind — after fifteen hours — that she was the woman for me.

In her white dress, she seemed innocent, virginal. Innocent she might be — but virginal, of course, she was not. She had slept with a husband, conceived and carried for a time a child, suffered twin losses. And was afraid of demons I did not understand.

I do remember the conversation

over our chocolate ice cream sundaes.

"I think, Andrea King, that God sent me to take care of you."

The big spoonful of chocolate-drenched ice cream stopped in mid-flight and then returned to its goblet.

"Don't say that."

"Why not?" I tried to laugh it off. "I think it's true."

"It is not true." Her lips, normally generous, narrowed into a thin, hard line. "I don't want to hear it ever again."

"I'm sorry if I made you angry."

"It is NOT true." Hands pressed together on her lap, she pushed her chair back from the table. "God did NOT send you."

Unaccountably she was furious.

"If you say so. . . ."

"Maybe" — the steam seemed to hiss out of her anger — "I'm the one who was sent."

"I'll gladly agree to that." I reached for one of the hands.

"And maybe" — she pulled the hand away — "God shouldn't be blamed for that."

There was an awkward pause. She was still angry but beginning to regret her outburst. I was baffled.

"Don't let your ice cream melt."

She laughed happily. "You're wonderful, Commander."

"When you smile at me that way, I think so, too."

"Irish." She dug into the sundae with renewed vigor. "You're incorrigibly Irish."

"You deserve the best, Andy King — if that's your real name, which I doubt."

"The best?"

"Clothes, homes, food, drink." I filled her wineglass again. "Cars, jewelry, children, lovers, everything."

"Why?"

"As a setting for your beauty."

"That earns you something only if you're willing to sell yourself. I'm not."

"I don't mean economically." The drink, as my mother would say, had loosened my tongue. "I mean artistically."

"If I were better educated. . . ."

"You would agree with me completely."

We laughed together, and the world seemed right in a way it hadn't since St. Mark's won the West Suburban grammar school basketball championship ten years before.

After dinner we sat alone on the terrace, in the still, dark night, and sipped coffee — still black — and Napoleon special reserve brandy. I was happily in love, and she was preoccupied.

"We both need sleep. Neither of us had much last night."

"How did you know that?"

"You drove all night, didn't you? Besides, you're so old, you should get your sleep."

I hadn't told her that I drove all night. But it didn't matter.

"I'll walk with you to your room in the other wing."

"That will be nice."

It took us some time and much tipsy laughter to find the right corridor.

At the door of her room, in the dimly lit and suggestive pastel hallway, I kissed her forehead. She lowered her eyes. "Good night, Commander, and thank you."

"Thank you," I said and departed, full steam astern, if you please.

If I had invited myself into her room and into her bed, she would not, I thought on that stern run, have resisted. But we had a whole lifetime ahead of us. Why should I rush her?

I was, after all, trustworthy, if not completely trustworthy.

Only as I was falling into a happy, if slightly inebriated, sleep, did I wonder who she thought had sent her into my life. If not God, then who else?

She was quiet and reserved at breakfast the next morning, and in the pool, and during much of our ride up 89 through Oracle and Florence toward the Superstition Mountains. I wondered if I had offended her the night before. Perhaps she had expected me to make love to her. She was, after all, sexually experienced, probably much more than I. I had treated her like a seventeen-year-old virgin on a prom date. Perhaps she was disappointed and frustrated.

She had given no sign that she wanted me in bed with her, had she?

How would I know what signs were like?

And pushed by the demons of curiosity that had almost landed me in naval intelligence instead of in the cockpit of an F6F, I had made my cursed phone call after breakfast to the manager of the Del Coronado.

"No, Commander, we have not employed a woman named Andrea King since we reopened. No Andreas and no Kings. Not at all, Commander. Glad to help."

Right.

I gave the cashier one of my hundred-dollar bills and waited for the change.

"Very lovely young woman, sir." He had a leathery cowpoke's face. "Terribly pale, isn't she?"

"Pigmentation," I murmured.

"When she talks and smiles, you don't notice, but before that you wonder if she's stepped out of a coffin."

I checked the remaining bills. Nine of them, all right. "Doctor says she has very sensitive skin. Should stay out of the sun."

Already lying to protect her.

I tried not to think of these two conversations on our heavy, silent ride north. Andy King, or whoever she might be, was lonely and alone. She needed my protection. Everything else would take care of itself.

I noted that her blouse was clean and her skirt neatly pressed. There was certainly an iron in the luggage I had hefted into the backseat of the Chevy.

She was not wearing her thin wed-

ding band. What did that mean?

I was not sure I wanted to think about that subject.

I halfheartedly suggested the monument at Casa Grande. She shivered more violently than she had the day before. I did not push the idea. She would want to say good-bye to me in Phoenix. Well, I would settle in, not necessarily at the Arizona Biltmore, and wait.

Somehow that didn't seem to be the kind of plan that would work.

We turned off 89 at Apache Junction and began to climb the foothills of the Superstition Mountains on a bumpy dirt road against which my poor old Chevy protested noisily.

"Why are we going up here?" she demanded impatiently. "I thought you were taking me to Phoenix."

"The Flying . . . I mean Lost Dutchman Mine. Remember, we talked about it yesterday."

"You think you can find in a few hours what others have hunted for decades?" Her lips curled in withering contempt, "You're a bigger fool than I thought you were."

"I wanted to be able to tell my kids that I looked for it."

She did not choose to respond to such foolishness, but instead curled into a tight, hard knot, turned away from me, and ignored both the tour and the tour guide.

The Sonora Desert is a weird place — Suharos (giant cacti with arms raised to heaven in prayer), Octilos

(trees that produce leaves only after rain, but after every rain), Palo Verdes (trees with their chlorophyll in the bark), rattlers, sidewinders, scorpions, Gila monsters, tarantulas, an occasional herd of mountain sheep, and once in a great while (so my guidebook said), a solitary mountain lion.

You wonder if you are still on earth.

The Superstition Mountains are even more bizarre — huge rocks poised over the dirt road as though they were ready to plunge down on you; steep, dark canyons; mad hairpin turns; brooding mountains that seemed ready on an instant's notice to become dangerous volcanoes. Well named, the Superstition Mountains. The foothills of hell, perhaps. Any evil that could be, might be here.

And today's batch of ominous thunderheads was already building up — dark, fierce, angry.

Ought I to call the game on account of darkness? Did I want to drive down this mountain goat's trail in a storm? Or after it had turned into an instant river with treacherous waterfalls?

Take her on to Phoenix before dark. Be done with her.

The F6F pilot with his Navy Cross tucked away somewhere, not quite sure where, lose his nerve and turn back?

I would, instead, compromise.

"We'll look at the ghost town down the road maybe a half mile and then

turn back," I said to my reluctant tourist. "It's called Clinton; most ghost towns have Anglo-Saxon rather than Spanish. . . ."

"Ghost town!" she screamed hysterically.

"Relax, Andrea King, if that's your name; ghost towns don't have ghosts. They're just old abandoned mining towns. Relics of the past."

She changed her tactics. Instead of the hard knot at the far end of the front seat, she became a soft little girl clinging to my arm. Notable improvement.

"Sorry I lost my temper."

"What I like is a satisfied tourist."

Ghost towns don't have ghosts, right? I mean, you can buy a book even today in any Tucson bookstore and read all about the ghost towns and never read a word about haunting. Ghost towns are so called because they are dead towns, not because they have the spirits of dead people.

Keep that in mind.

If you've ever visited an Arizona ghost town, first reaction, very likely, is disappointment. Just a few old buildings without any roofs or windowpanes, vegetation growing through the floorboards, an occasional sign tilting at a crazy angle, wind maybe rustling loose clapboards, an occasional small creature darting away in righteous surprise that its haven has been invaded, broken pieces of what might have been furniture lit-

tering the land between the buildings.
Not much.

You think to yourself that it's hard to imagine that anyone ever lived here, and that Hollywood could build better ghost towns than Arizona has.

Clinton produced exactly that reaction. It was nothing more than four broken-down buildings, three small ones, another larger — a town hall, tavern, and hotel all rolled into one, according to my guidebook.

"It doesn't look very scary." She released my arm, but still snuggled close to me as I stopped the car.

"It isn't. Do you want to stay in the car or explore with me?"

She looked up at the sky, now a threatening gray. "I want to stay with you."

I opened the car door, helped her out, and tentatively put an arm around her shoulders. Her poor little heart was pounding wildly. She cuddled close to me.

"Clinton, Arizona — or Arizona Territory — to be precise. That canyon was a stream fifty years ago." I pointed to a deep gorge behind the pathetic row of fading shacks. "They came up the mountains on the same road we did, then down the side of the mountain and pitched their tents and put up these buildings here. They prospected in the stream and in the caves on the side of the canyon. They found a vein of silver, and others poured in. They exhausted the vein pretty quickly, and then everyone left.

Whether the Dutchman came before Clinton was built or after depends on which legend you believe."

"How much time did you spend with the guidebook —" her eyes glinted briefly with amusement — "before you left San Diego?"

"Two weeks." Damn it, she had made me blush again. "I like to be prepared. . . . Anyway, they had a lot of sickness, too. Something like typhoid fever, though a little different. The canyon was supposed to be an ancient Apache sacred place. Couldn't have been too ancient, because the Apache came here only in the seven-teen hundreds after the Cherokee chased them out of Texas and Oklahoma, where they were herdsmen rather than rustlers. Anyway, one story says that before each new outbreak of the disease, a huge black cloud came to the town at night. Not much regret when Clinton closed down."

"Poor people."

"Any poorer than us?"

"A lot."

"I suppose."

We walked along the creaking remnants of a porch on the front of the main building. She stumbled on a loose board, and I held her close.

"You're right. Hollywood could do it better."

I kicked open the loosely hanging door of the main building. A mouse or some other small creature rushed across the floor, stirring up a cloud of smoke behind him.

"Dust," she said. "Decades of dust. There must be an inch of it on the floor."

"In the desert, that could be only a year's collection."

"Do you want to go in?" she asked respectfully.

"The commander does not want to go in." I hugged her shoulders. "Not at all, thank you very much."

A bolt of lightning leaped from one of the immense mountains behind us, jumped across the sky, and buried itself in another mountain. In the distance, thunder rolled grimly. Andrea threw her arms around me in abject terror.

"Don't worry, Andrea King," I said, trying to sound like the squadron leader of VF 29. "I'll take care of you. Always. If you give me a chance."

I touched her face. It was cold; cold as death, I thought, even though the gray sky and the occasional raindrops had not cooled the air.

"If only you could. . . ."

Protectiveness turned without warning to passion. My lips sought hers. . . .my fingers searched for her breasts; our bodies pushed together. She was mine for the taking. I pushed the blouse off her shoulders.

And stopped. Not this way. Not here.

"Sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to. . . ."

"My fault," she replied.

"My fault . . .," I insisted. Then we laughed and relaxed. "I do love you."

"Don't say that." She laid her fingers on my lips. "Not yet."

"Let's get out of here." I readjusted her blouse and fastened the buttons.

"Thank you, Commander." Her marvelous blue eyes danced with mischief.

Later in the night, in the midst of the horror, I had the strange feeling that none of it would have happened if I had made love to her at that moment — not in the first wild rush of passion, but in the magic of our eyes dancing happily with one another.

"I think those corsets you swim in would come off very easily, even if they are wet."

"That's because you never had to take off a real corset." She rocked back and forth in laughter. "Though you would enjoy every uncomfortable, frustrating second of it, wouldn't you?" She leaned her head against my chest. "Maybe God did send you, Lieutenant Commander Daugherty. If he did, he has good taste in angels."

"I WILL take care of you, Andy," I insisted, with, as it turned out, foolish confidence.

We strolled, arm in arm, back to the Chevy — two strong, happy young people rejoicing in the prospects of life ahead of them.

I must insist on that point. Whatever sense of doom she had felt since Bing Crosby and the train station — and I had felt driving up the side of the Superstition Mountains — had

vanished. Neither of us sensed evil closing in.

I opened the door of the Chevy for her.

"Thank you, Commander, sir."

I went around to the other side, noticing that the first torrent of rain was racing along the gorge toward us.

I turned the ignition key over. Nothing happened. The Chevy had its temperament, but it always started. I pulled out the choke, cranked the gas pedal once, and flipped the key again.

"That's funny," I said. "It always starts."

The rain was on us, plunging the inside of the car into midnight darkness.

"It's coming for us," she said calmly. "Don't worry, Jerry, I'll take care of you."

Whatever it was, it came, all right.

The doors of the Chevy swung open as though a giant had flipped them open as he raced by us. Wind, I told myself.

It wasn't wind, however, that grabbed the two of us, hurled us out of the car, and carried us through the air, like parachutists in free-fall, toward the main building and through the door that opened just before we slammed into it.

The thick black cloud was there already, licking its chops in anticipation. We were both slammed against the wall across the room and pinned against it, a couple of feet off the

floor. Invisible hands jabbed and poked us, the way Indians were supposed to torture their victims before killing them. For a few moments I saw Andrea twisting and turning against the wall, then she was lost in the inky darkness. Her screams continued for a long time. Then they, too stopped.

What happened next seemed like the whole of eternity. In fact, it lasted at the most only a few hours, and maybe only a few minutes. It was like being tumbled down the side of a mountain in a landslide of nightmares, yet the experience was more real than any nightmare and not so much less real than being awake as a different kind of real.

My nightmares and Andrea's fused and consumed us both. I was being destroyed by these combined nightmares, and, even if I could no longer hear her screams, she was being destroyed with me.

My first accusers were the men I'd lost in VF 29 — Rusty, Hank, Tony, Marshal, all the others. They circled around me, their dead, distorted faces and empty eyes fading in and out in the blackness, screaming curses and accusations. I had cut short their lives, stolen them from their wives and sweethearts and from the children they never knew. I had sent them all to hell.

I shouted my innocence: I had tried to protect all my men; war was hell; casualties were inevitable; I had

done my best. . . .

Either they did not hear or they did not care. They were dead and in hell, and I was still alive.

And the heat of the wall, to which I was pinned, became with each accusation more like a frying pan.

Rusty turned into a tiny baby, gurgling helplessly, as it was held underwater; Tony changed into a sailor half of whose head had been shot away. They, too, accused me of cutting short their lives.

"I didn't kill you," I shrieked. "She did!"

So much for taking care of Andy.

My betrayal did not save me. The screams of outrage continued; my frying pan was now white-hot; the invisible hands tormenting me became more insistent and determined.

Then the new dead were replaced by the old dead — brown-skinned, primitive people from long ago; Spaniards, Apache; other Indians; Americans; my relatives from Ireland; men and women whom I did not recognize, from her past, not mine.

They all died horribly, tortured, scalped, raped, butchered, ravaged by disease; men burned at the stake, women cut into tiny pieces that were then roasted over campfires, children whose heads were smashed against the rock walls of the canyon.

They all accused me. I was the master murderer, the true Hitler of all history. I was the death that had slain them all.

"No! No!" I screamed. "I didn't do it! She did! She is death, not I!"

As I try to recall those psychotic images, an exercise that has fascinated me for forty years (my wife says that I'm the kind who can't keep his tongue off an infected tooth), I think that even then the one or two sane cells that still were working in my brain wondered when the Japanese, whom I had undoubtedly really killed in aerial combat, would come to accuse me of their murder.

They never showed up; make of that what you will.

The dead and the dying faded into the blackness; and the blackness itself slowly lifted, to hover like the threat of pestilence beneath the ceiling. The dead returned to dance.

They whirled and spun, leapt and cavorted, jumped and gamboled like they were celebrating a graveyard Mardi Gras, all the time performing unspeakably lascivious acts on each other. I was pulled off the wall like a prize trophy and made to dance with them. Why not? I would soon join them, if I had not done so already.

Did I believe that the horror was more than illusion when it was happening?

Then and now. It was not illusion. It was as real as the Compaq 286 on which I am setting down the story of Andy King, or the first chapter, anyway.

Maybe the horror was on a different plane of reality (whatever that

means) than my micro, but it was still real. More real.

Why am I alive, then? Why did I receive a several-decade — still indeterminate — stay of execution?

I don't know. Not for sure. Anyway, they didn't get me that night in the Superstition Mountains. Or, obviously, I wouldn't be writing this story.

The dead left me, with a strong promise that they would be back in a little while. I was still pinned against the wall in total blackness. I shouted for Andrea, but she did not or could not reply.

Then I heard a clink beneath my feet, coins falling on the floor. Despite the darkness, I could see the glint of gold. Hundreds, then thousands, of gold coins piled up beneath me, around me, rising rapidly to my throat. I was being buried in gold.

I pleaded with the horror to spare me. I had not come looking for gold.

But you did, the darkness screamed; you wanted to search for the mine of the Dutchman.

Only as a joke.

The clinking stopped.

Then the Dutchman. Not the Flying Dutchman. The Lost Dutchman, though he did not think he was lost. And he wasn't lost. It was the mine that was lost.

He was only dead.

He was a tall, cadaverous old man with a bald head and a dirty white beard. He told me where his mine

was. All the searchers are totally wrong about where it might be.

More gold than in South Africa and Russia put together. A mountain, quite literally, of gold. I know exactly where it is.

Why haven't I gone back to get it? I don't need it. I don't want it. And I wouldn't return to the Superstition Mountains for all the gold in the world.

Which is probably why the Dutchman told me where his lost mine was.

He disappeared with his horde of gold, and the dead — the other dead — returned for more dancing. The men of VF 29 and Andrea's half-headed husband and drowned baby with them.

I knew I was going to die. The *danse macabre* was for me. I spun faster and faster as I was passed from one set of obscene hands to another. I teetered on the brink of an eternity of hell, where the torments of my dance of death endured forever.

Then, made bold by a surge of courage whose origin I did not know, I informed my tormentors that I was very sorry, but I was not about to join them on their return trip to Hades. I didn't belong there. Purgatory maybe, but not hell. So the bus would have to leave without me.

They didn't like it. The violins screeched more wildly; the dancers whirled more insanely. Jeremiah Gregory Peter Daugherty, U.S.N.R., dug in his heels. No. And I mean no.

All right, we'll take her. She's the

one we want anyway.

Fine. You can have her. She belongs in hell.

They tossed me back to the wall and continued their feverish gavotte. Yes, she is the one we want. We will come for him later.

It's all right with me. I thought she looked like she was dead the first time I saw her. Take her, and you're welcome.

Exhausted, burning with heat, terrified, ready to die if only to escape the madness, I thought about my decision.

Coward.

Wait a minute, guys, you can't have her either. Why not? Because she's mine, not yours, that's why not. I have staked my claim on her. The Dutchman can have his damn mine, I'll take her. The matter is not subject for discussion.

Air Boss One says so! Pilots, man your planes!

Many years later I wondered if what came next was a war in heaven.

Leyte Gulf on a bigger scale. Between good and evil. Was she that important?

At that moment, despite my pain and fear and near madness, I had no doubt.

Whatever it was, the struggle for Andrea King if-that-was-her-name was titanic. Not a debate, not a trial, not an argument, but a furious tug-of-war. I wanted her and they wanted her. I loved her and they hated her.

We fought all night. Or so it seemed. Sometimes I thought I had won her. Other times I thought the black cloud had defeated me and carried her off.

Then darkness settled in on me — permanently, it seemed. I was not sure whether I had won or lost.

Much later, consciousness slowly ebbed back into my organism. At first I thought I was in hell. Well, maybe purgatory. Wherever, I was on fire. I tried to open my eyes. The lids wouldn't move. I tried again, hard. Finally they flickered open. Before they closed, I realized that I was neither in hell nor purgatory but under a blazing sun in a ghost town in Superstition Mountains.

What was I doing here?

Then I remembered the horror.

Andrea!

I struggled to my feet. The Chevy stood mutely next to me. I looked in the window. The key was still in the ignition. I opened the door and turned the key.

My faithful mount purred contentedly.

Where was Andrea!

No luggage in the backseat.

I turned off the ignition and raced — well, hobbled — to the main building of the ghost town. She wasn't there.

I searched desperately in every corner of that shriveled old town. Not a trace.

I collapsed on the dilapidated steps of the main building. She had depart-

ed; of that I was absolutely certain. I glanced at my watch — 1:15 in the afternoon. If she had started at, say, midnight, she would have had time to walk down the side of the mountains to 89 and then thumb a ride to Phoenix. Who would turn down a pretty girl, lugging a heavy bag, on a hot, dusty morning.

Impossible? Sure. It was all improbable. Maybe she had been carried off to hell, paperboard suitcase and all.

I would drive as far as the Arizona Biltmore, on the chance I would see her. Then. . . .

Then it didn't matter.

I returned to the car. It still worked.

What had happened? Had she somehow become a magnet, drawing evil energies down to this sick old place?

Or was she really dead, as I thought the first moment I had seen her? A lost soul seeking her way to hell?

Was she being punished, perhaps, for having murdered her husband and child? Doomed to wander the earth like. . . .

Like a Flying Dutchman!

Or had I imagined it all?

I turned off the ignition once more and, as I used to overfly the ocean before returning to the Big E searching for life rafts, went back to the ghost town for one last look.

I saw for the first time that the dust had disappeared from the floor

of the main building. As though there had been a dance the night before.

In one corner of the room, I saw a bit of white cloth crumpled into a loose ball. I picked it up and rubbed it with my fingers. Cloth from her blouse.

It was my turn to shiver. I should call the state police. What could I tell them? A woman whose name I did not know had disappeared I knew not where, because demons out of hell had swept through a ghost town in the Superstition Mountains.

I'd be locked up for psychiatric observation. No one would search for her.

I tossed the cotton rag on the floor, limped back to the Chevy, backed it up, turned around, and went down the mountains.

I didn't find her on the road to the Arizona Biltmore. I thought about staying there overnight and decided that I didn't want to be anywhere near Phoenix. I thought about one more search up in the Superstition Mountains. Had I not discovered two rafts after the Marianas Turkey Shoot?

Yeah, and your tank had a thimbleful of gas when you landed on the E. Fuel is not a problem on this mission.

She's not there. She's not anywhere.

I drove back to Tucson and slept till noon the next day in my old room at the Arizona Inn. The registration clerk had not asked about Andy, thank

God. None of the lies I had concocted on the way back from the Superstition Mountains would have been very persuasive.

I woke up with a terrible headache, a thick tongue, a bad sunburn, and an acute fit of depression. Having demanded black coffee and orange juice from room service, I gave the depression my full attention.

Who was she? Or, better, what was she?

A lost soul doomed to wander the earth like a Flying Dutchman?

A demon sent to tempt me? God knows, she'd been successful at that.

A creation of my disturbed imagination? So maybe I should see a therapist as my father had suggested.

A ghost haunting navy flyers?

I would never know.

I soaked a washcloth, put it on my head, and pitched back into bed.

Only to be pulled out of it by room service. The *Arizona Star's* headline: "Wallace Proposes Truman Appease Russia."

A secret letter had been released in which the former vice president advocated that the United States destroy its atomic bombs because the Russians resented the American monopoly.

Most senators ridiculed the suggestion. Wallace might be a nut, I thought, but how many of those who ridiculed him had seen Nagasaki?

Halfway through my first cup of coffee, I had an idea. My contact at

the Bureau of Personnel quickly confirmed what I had suspected: a radar technician named John King had never served on the USS *Indianapolis*.

Who was I to think, I could hear my sister's voice, that I was someone special? The great war adventure, ugly but exhilarating, was over. There would be no more adventures, and I should accept that and settle down. Right?

Besides, this last great romantic adventure with the widow of a radar technician who had never lived had turned into a nightmare, a real-life nightmare that made the kamikaze attacks seem boring.

Forget it, Daugherty. Go back to River Forest and act like the ordinary human being that you are supposed to be. Marriage, family, career are enough for everyone else, why not for you? Why do you need some special purpose in life?

Your sisters and your mother will find you a nice Trinity grad virgin who will be a good, unexciting spouse.

In fact, get on with it. Since you're horny again, go home and inspect the girls they've lined up.

I drained the coffee cup and filled it again.

Abandon this quixotic jaunt across the continent and fly home tomorrow. Catch a plane in Phoenix. Who flies there? TWA? They must. What sense does it make to call yourself Transcontinental and Western if Western doesn't include Phoenix?

I had the money for a ticket, didn't I?

I stretched out on my bed, reached into the pocket of my tattered and soiled jacket, and pulled out my wallet.

Sure enough, the thin stack of bills was still there. I counted them. Eight. Just like there should be.

I replaced the wallet and returned to my coffee.

Eight?

I reflected very carefully, while my heart pounded like a damaged engine on an F6F. I had had ten of them when I drove into Tucson. I used one to pay the charges here the night before last. I had bought nothing else, not even lunch.

There should be nine.

I thought about that. Go on, dopey, count them again.

Fingers trembling, I recovered my wallet. I removed the bills gently and counted. My heart sank. There were indeed nine.

Try again.

This time there were eight.

You're losing control.

I spread the C-notes out on the bed in pairs.

Four pairs. Four times two is eight.

I felt my painfully burned face cracking into a grin.

I replaced the wallet, set aside my coffee cup, and relaxed on the bed, hands behind my head in complacent satisfaction.

My grin widened as I reviewed the bidding. I whistled "Anchors Aweigh,"

extraordinarily pleased with myself.

A thief would have taken all nine.

A ghost would not have needed any.

So she was a human girl — lonely, frightened, perhaps in some crazy way possessed. Yet she was out there, still running. Still in the grip of her fierce desire to live.

She was mine. Had I not won her the night before?

Mine. And I was hers, too. Fair enough.

Had she murdered her husband and child?

Had I murdered Rusty and Tony and Hank?

No.

If she was out there, I would find her. And drag her home by her thick red hair. With a stop here for purposes of lovemaking. Honeymoon. Whatever. We'd see about how hard indeed it was for a determined lover to remove a corsetlike wet swimsuit.

Not too hard, surely.

Then River Forest. It would never be the same.

I would hunt down my leprechaun girl with her pot of gold.

My own Holy Grail to pursue, to drink from, to keep, to treasure.

She was somewhere out there. Terrified. I would find her and save her from whatever was causing the terror.

No, with someone like Andrea King if-that-was-her-name, you helped her to save herself from the terror. And

then you protected her from more terror by loving her passionately and tenderly forever.

There was no room for doubt. I would indeed love her forever.



PILOTS, MAN YOUR PLANES!
Air Boss One called room service again and ordered pancakes.
And steak.

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In 1985, with Comet Halley approaching, I was asked by several magazines to do articles on it.

I did such an article for one of them, and I received it back with the comment that I had put in all sort of scientific material of little interest but had neglected the thing most people want to know — when and where to view it best.

I replied by pointing out that it would be useless to do so because the comet was going to pass at quite a distance from the Earth and at such an angle as to be high in the sky only in the southern hemisphere. To see it at all, a trip southward would be indicated, which few of the magazine's readers could afford, and if any did go south they would see, at best, a small dim patch of haze.

I also expressed a little of my bitterness at the incredible ballyhoo and exaggeration that was being displayed in connection with the comet. This was bound to result in the disappointment of a vast number of people, and I said, "I don't intend to add to the hype."

The editor of the magazine was not moved by my eloquence, however. He rejected the article, and I did not get a kill fee, either. (However, Gentle Reader, do not weep for me. I sold the article, without changing a word, to another and better magazine for exactly twice the sum the first had offered.)

Science



**ISAAC
ASIMOV**

In January 1985, I had published a book with Walker and Company entitled *ASIMOV'S GUIDE TO HALLEY'S COMET*. In it, I also gave no detailed advice on viewing it. In fact, I stated flatly that the comet would not present a good show. Don't think that some reviewers didn't fault me for omitting detailed information on viewing.

What saddens me about all this is not only that so many people were disappointed in the comet, but that many of them may have been disillusioned with science. I wonder how many of them thought that the dimness of the comet was due to the inefficiency of the astronomers arranging the show, or of their ignorance.

I can only wish that astronomers had been more vocal in their explanation of what the comet's appearance would be like, and a bit readier to denounce all the hucksterism. They were, however, concentrating on the various rocket fly-bys that were going to (and *did*) make the passage the most successful one (scientifically speaking) ever.

But I'm glad it's all over. I did my share of speaking and writing about comets (without hype), even in this essay series, but I'm glad to get on to other subjects. There is, for instance, the matter of interstellar travel, something that is very commonplace in science fiction, but not often discussed elsewhere.

A leading investigator into the possibilities, however, is Dr. Robert L. Forward of Hughes Research Laboratories, who is himself a crackerjack speaker. I had to follow him with a talk of my own at a symposium at a recent meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and I had to stretch myself to the limit so as not to appear inadequate in contrast.

Let me then take up the subject of interstellar travel, being guided in this by some of Bob's ideas which, of course, I'll expound in my own way.

So far, every vessel we've sent into space, with or without people on board, whether on a sub-orbital flight, or on a probe to Uranus, has been powered by a chemical reaction engine.

In other words, we have sent out rockets, carrying fuel and oxidizer (say, liquid hydrogen and liquid oxygen). When these undergo a chemical reaction, that produces energy which forces the heated gases of the exhaust in one direction while the rest of the rocket moves in the other, in accordance with the law of action and reaction.

The energy of chemical reactions is obtained at the expense of the mass of the system. Mass is a highly concentrated form of energy, and

even a very large amount of energy (on the human scale) is formed at the cost of the loss of an insignificant amount of mass.

Thus, suppose we were to burn 1.6 million kilograms (about 1,800 tons) of liquid hydrogen in 12.8 million kilograms (about 14,400 tons) of liquid oxygen, so as to end with 14.4 million kilograms (about 16,200 tons) of water vapor. As a result of some hasty back-of-the-envelope calculations, it seems to me that if we were to weigh the water vapor *precisely*, however, we would find that it would be just one gram short of the combined original masses of hydrogen and oxygen. All the energy produced by the chemical combination of those millions of tons of hydrogen and oxygen would be equivalent to the loss of 1 gram of mass. That means that the combination of hydrogen and oxygen releases less than a ten-billionth of its mass in the form of energy.

When you see a tremendous rocket go zooming into the heavens, creating a thunder that makes the earth tremble beneath your feet, just remember, then, that all that fuss represents an insignificant percentage of the energy which, in theory, is present in that mass of fuel and oxidizer.

There may well be some chemicals that on mixing and reacting can outdo hydrogen and oxygen in this respect, but not by much. All chemical fuels are pitiful as sources of energy, and must be accumulated in enormous mass for the amount of energy they can produce. Chemical energy may do very well for ordinary human tasks on Earth's surface. Enough mass can even be accumulated on rocket ships to supply the energy for lofting them into orbit and for exploring the Solar system. For *interstellar* travel, however, chemical reactions are quite hopeless.

The difference between a flight from here to Pluto, and one from here to the *nearest* star is about the same as the difference between half a kilometer and the length of Earth's circumference. You can paddle a canoe for half a kilometer, but it isn't likely you would consider paddling around the world.

To be sure, a chemical rocket doesn't have to "paddle" all the way. It can reach a certain speed and then coast, but there will have to be enough fuel to reach that speed and then to decelerate at the other end and, in between, to keep the life-support systems going for the incredible length of time it would take to coast to even the nearest star. It's too much, absolutely too much. The amount of fuel such a ship would have to carry would be simply prohibitive.

Unless, then, there is a richer source of energy than chemical reactions, interstellar travel is hopeless.

Nuclear energy was discovered at the opening of the 20th Century. Where chemical energy involves the rearrangements of the electrons in the outer reaches of the atom, nuclear energy involves the rearrangements of the particles within the nucleus. The latter involves much larger energy changes than the former does.

Suppose, then, that instead of burning hydrogen in oxygen, we extract the energy from uranium in the course of its radioactive breakdown. How much uranium would we need to start with in order to have converted 1 gram of mass to energy by the time all of it had turned to lead?

The answer (where's the back of my envelope?) is that about 4,285 grams of uranium, on complete breakdown, will convert 1 of its grams to energy. This means, still, that only 0.023 percent of the mass of the uranium will be converted into energy, but this is a little over 3 million times as much energy as you would get out of the same mass of hydrogen/oxygen interaction.

There is a catch, though. The radioactive breakdown of uranium, and the consequent production of energy, takes place extraordinarily slowly. Start with 4,285 grams of uranium, and half its breakdown energy would be released only after 4.46 billion years, while 95 percent of its breakdown energy would be produced only after 18 billion years.

Who could wait?

Can the breakdown be speeded up? During the first third of the century, there was no known practical way of doing so. To produce nuclear rearrangements, one had to bombard the nucleus with subatomic particles. This was an enormously inefficient method, and the energy that would have to be invested would be many times greater than the energy that could be squeezed out of target nuclei in the process.

It was for this reason that Ernest Rutherford felt there was no hope whatever of being able to make practical use of nuclear energy on a large scale. He described such thoughts as "moonshine." Nor was he a fool. He is one of those on my list of the ten greatest scientists of all times. It was just that he died in 1937 and had no way of foreseeing fission. Had he lived just 2¼ years longer—

Whereas, in natural radioactivity, uranium atoms break down in small bits and pieces, in uranium fission, the atom breaks into two nearly equal pieces. This releases even more energy than ordinary radioactive breakdown.

About 1,077 grams of fissioning uranium will convert 1 of its grams to energy by the time the process is concluded. This means that 0.093 percent of the mass of uranium is converted into energy by fission. This is just about 4 times as much energy as you can get from an equal weight of uranium undergoing natural radioactive breakdown.

In addition, whereas natural radioactive breakdown cannot be hurried in any practical way, uranium fission can easily be made to take place with explosive speed. Therefore, if we can somehow use nuclear fission to propel spaceships, we will have an energy source some 12 million times as copious as that of chemical interactions. That would surely increase the likelihood of being able to make interstellar voyages, but would it increase it enough?

Bob Forward points out that by using uranium fission to produce the backward thrust of an exhaust, a spaceship could, in 50 years, reach a distance of 200 billion kilometers from the Sun.

This is about 16 times the average distance of Pluto from the Sun, so it isn't bad; but it isn't good either, for such a distance represents only 1/200th the distance to the *nearest* star. For a ship to take 10,000 years to reach Alpha Centauri certainly leaves a great deal of room for improvement.

But fission isn't the ultimate. Still more energy can be obtained through nuclear fusion. The fusion of four hydrogen nuclei to one helium nucleus is a particularly energy-rich process.

It takes about 146 grams of fusing hydrogen to convert 1 of its grams to energy by the conclusion of fusion. This means that 0.685 percent of the mass of fusing hydrogen is converted into energy, so that there is 7.36 times as much energy to be obtained out of hydrogen fusion as out of uranium fission.

Of course, we don't have controlled fusion as yet, but we do have uncontrolled fusion in the form of hydrogen bombs. People have therefore speculated on the possibility of traveling through space by exploding hydrogen bombs behind the ship one after the other.

The debris from the fusion explosions would push outward in all directions and some of it would strike a "pusher plate" attached to the spaceship. The blow is absorbed by means of powerful shock absorbers that would transfer momentum at a reasonable rate to the ship itself.

In 1968, Freeman Dyson imagined an interstellar vessel with a mass of 400,000 tons, carrying 300,000 fusion bombs each weighing one ton. If

these bombs were exploded behind the ship at three-second intervals, the ship could be accelerated at 1g. That is, everyone on board would feel an apparent normal gravitational pull in the direction of the exploding bombs. The ship would be rising like a steadily accelerating elevator, and this acceleration would push your feet against the "floor" — actually the rear — of the ship.

In ten days, the 300,000 fusion bombs would have been consumed, and the ship would have attained a speed of about 10,000 kilometers per second. If the ship is aimed in the right direction and coasts at this speed, it will pass Alpha Centauri in 130 years. If one wants to make a landing on some object orbiting about one of the stars of that system, one would naturally have to carry another 300,000 hydrogen bombs and explode them in front of the ship — or else, turn the ship around with ordinary chemical reaction motors, and then explode the hydrogen bombs behind the ship again, that behind now facing Alpha Centauri.

Reaching Alpha Centauri in 130 years is far better than reaching it in 10,000 years, but it still means that the original voyagers would have to spend their entire life on board ship, and that their great-grandchildren, most likely, would be landing somewhere in the Alpha Centauri planetary systems. What's more, we can't count on relativistic effect making the time seem shorter for the crew. Even at 10,000 kilometers per second (one-thirtieth the speed of light) relativistic effects are insignificant. The apparent time for the crew members will be cut by an hour or so, no more.

Things would be better, perhaps, if we had controlled fusion and could maintain such reactions on board ship for an extended period. The products of the fusion reaction could be allowed to leak out behind at a steady and manageable rate, producing a jet that could accelerate the ship in the other direction, exactly like a rocket exhaust. In this way, then, all the energy of fusion could be directed into acceleration, instead of only that part of the power of the exploding bombs that happened to be directed toward the pusher plate, while the power in other directions is wasted on the vacuum of space.

Then, too, the controlled fusion reaction would supply the power continuously instead of through a series of successive shocks. Nevertheless, I don't think the time necessary to reach Alpha Centauri would be reduced below the century mark.

Even hydrogen fusion converts less than 1 percent of the fuel into energy. Is there any way we can do still better?

Yes, there is such a thing as antimatter. (I discussed this last month, and I promised I'd come back to the subject this month. Did you think I wouldn't?)

Antimatter will combine with matter and will, in the process, annihilate all the matter interacting. Thus, half a gram of antimatter, combining with half a gram of matter, would produce 146 times as much energy as fusing a gram of uranium, or several billion times as much energy as burning a gram of hydrogen in oxygen.

The most easily available form of antimatter is the antielectron (or "positron"). If, however, antielectrons are allowed to interact with electrons, then they produce pure energy in the form of gamma-ray photons. These emerge in all directions and cannot easily be channeled into an exhaust.

Next simplest is the antiproton, which is the nucleus of an antihydrogen atom, whereas the proton is the nucleus of a hydrogen atom. For simplicity's sake, then, we can speak of antihydrogen and hydrogen.

If antihydrogen and hydrogen are allowed to interact, a mixture of unstable particles, "pions" and antipions," are the major products. These, being electrically charged, can be channeled into a very rapid rocket exhaust, driving the ship forward. The pions and antipions turn into "muons" and "antimuons" after a brief interval, and, after a somewhat longer interval, the muons and antimuons turn into electrons and antielectrons. In the end, all of the mass of the original hydrogen and antihydrogen is converted into energy except for the trace amount that escapes in the form of electrons and non-electrons that manage to remain apart and not to interact.

In addition, a large quantity of ordinary hydrogen can be added to the interacting mixture. This hydrogen would be heated to enormous temperatures and would also emerge as a rocket exhaust, so to speak, adding to the acceleration.

Forward has calculated that 9 kilograms of antihydrogen and 4 tons of hydrogen, between them, could accelerate a spaceship to one-tenth the speed of light (30,000 kilometers per second), and that will mean reaching Alpha Centauri in something like 40 years.

Perhaps, if enough antimatter is used, speeds equal to one-fifth the speed of light (60,000 kilometers per second) can be reached. In that case, a round-trip to Alpha Centauri might take no more than 40 years. It

would then be possible to go there and back in a single lifetime, and we can imagine that, assuming spaceships that are large enough and sufficiently comfortable, some young people might be willing to devote their lives to it.

But there are difficulties.

To begin with, in our section of the Universe, and perhaps in the Universe as a whole, antiprotons exist only in the tiniest traces. It would be necessary to manufacture them.

This can be done, for instance, by bombarding metal targets with high-speed protons. The spray of energy that results is converted to particles in part, these particles including some antiprotons. At the moment, the number of antiprotons formed is only about 2 for every 100,000,000 protons fired at the target. To try to gather enough antiprotons for an interstellar mission at this rate would be an expensive undertaking indeed, but it is natural to hope that the efficiency of antiproton production would be greatly increased in time.

Once antiprotons are produced, another problem arises. Antiprotons will immediately react with any protons they encounter, and every bit of ordinary matter contains protons. The task of keeping hydrogen and oxygen from uncontrollable explosion before you are ready for an orderly burning is as nothing compared with the task of keeping antiprotons from premature explosion of a far more drastic sort.

Once formed, antiprotons must be isolated from all matter and kept isolated till one is ready for the interaction with protons. While this is difficult, it is not impossible. We can imagine solid antihydrogen being stored in a vacuum, the "walls" of which consist of electric or magnetic fields. If this is done some day, ships powered by antihydrogen may streak through space from Earth to Mars in weeks, to Pluto in months, and to the nearest star in decades.

In everything I have described so far, the interstellar spaceships must carry fuel. The most concentrated possible fuel we know of is antiproton, but what if you needed no fuel at all?

You would need none if the fuel existed all about you in space and, in a way, it does. Space is not truly empty, not even between galaxies, and certainly not between the stars within a galaxy. There is a scattering of hydrogen atoms (or their nuclei) everywhere.

Suppose you launch a ship with a minimum of ordinary fuel, just enough to build up the speed that would allow you to scoop up enough

interstellar hydrogen. Such hydrogen could then be made to fuse and the products of fusion fired out behind as exhaust, first supplementing and then replacing the original supply of fuel.

You can then continue to accelerate indefinitely, because there is no danger of running out of fuel, and the faster you go, the more fuel you can collect in a unit of time. This is an "interstellar ramjet" and, using it you can finally achieve speeds as near the speed of light as you wish. Allowing for acceleration and deceleration, you might make the round-trip to Alpha Centauri in only 15 years.

That's what it would take as far as people on Earth were concerned. The astronauts, themselves, would, at ultra-fast speeds, experience a slowdown in apparent time passage. What might seem like 15 years to the stay-at-homes on Earth, might seem only about 7 years to the astronauts.

Seven years out of a lifetime isn't at all bad. It's only twice the time spent by the survivors of Magellan's voyage, nearly five centuries ago, to circumnavigate the Earth for the first time.

More than that, if you continue coasting at very nearly the speed of light, hardly any additional time will pass as far as the astronauts are concerned. If they decide to travel to the other end of the Galaxy, or to an alien galaxy a hundred million light years away, they may feel the passage only of some additional months in the first case, and a couple of additional years in the second.

Of course, they would come home to find that a hundred thousand or a hundred million years had passed on Earth, which might rather spoil their fun. Still, with interstellar ramjets, the problem of travel among the stars might seem to be solved.

But there are catches. In order to collect enough hydrogen out of interstellar space, assuming it contains 1000 atoms per cubic centimeter, you would need a scoop that is over a hundred kilometers across, and that supposes that the hydrogen atoms are ionized and therefore carry an electric charge so that they can be scooped up by appropriate electric or magnetic fields.

Unfortunately the interstellar space about the Sun is sparse in hydrogen, and contains less than 0.1 hydrogen atoms for every cubic centimeter. For that reason the scoop would have to be 10,000 kilometers across, and have an area about $2/5$ that of Earth's surface. What's more, the hydrogen atoms in our vicinity are not ionized and are, therefore, not easily collectible. (Perhaps that is not entirely unfortunate, however. If our neighborhood of space were thick with ionized hydrogen, we would

be near enough to something violent to make it a little dubious whether life could survive on Earth.

Besides, even if we could scoop up enough hydrogen and push it through the fusion engines, it may not be practical for an interstellar spaceship to go faster than a fifth the speed of light.

After all, the faster we go, the more difficult it is to avoid collisions with small objects and the more damage such a collision will wreak. Even if we are fortunate enough to miss all sizable objects, we can scarcely expect to miss the dust and individual atoms that are scattered throughout space.

At two-tenths of the speed of light, dust and atoms might not do significant damage even in a voyage of forty years, but the faster you go, the worse it is — space begins to become abrasive. When you begin to approach the speed of light, each hydrogen atom becomes a cosmic ray particle and will fry the crew. (A hydrogen atom or its nucleus striking the ship at nearly the speed of light is a cosmic ray particle, and there is no difference if the ship strikes the hydrogen atom or nucleus at nearly the speed of light. As Sancho Panza says: "Whether the stone strikes the pitcher, or the pitcher strikes the stone, it is bad for the pitcher.") So 60,000 kilometers per second may be the *practical* speed limit for space travel.

Even the interstellar ramjet makes use of the rocket principle. Bob Forward, however, talks of "rocketless rocketry." The ship might be pushed by pellets fired from within the Solar system or by a maser beam or a laser beam.

These devices would also make it unnecessary for an interstellar space ship to carry its own fuel and would also allow a buildup to speeds near that of light. The advantage of such things over ramjets would be that they would not depend on surrounding space having very special and hard-to-meet characteristics.

Of course, the technical difficulties would be formidable indeed. A laser beam, for instance, would have to strike an aluminum-film sail that would be 1,000 kilometers in diameter and, even if extremely thin, would be sure to weigh 80,000,00 kilograms or so. And speeds above 1/5 that of light would remain impractical.

I think, then, that a forty-year round trip, with antimatter fuel, is the best we can do, if we want to explore the interstellar spaces within the

lifetime of the astronaut. And even that will take him only to the nearest star.

That is not to be sneezed at, or course. It will allow us to study, in detail, a second star that is very much like our Sun (Alpha Centauri A), one that is distinctly smaller and dimmer (Alpha Centauri B), and one that is a small red dwarf (Alpha Centauri C) — to say nothing of any planetary objects that may circle any of the three.

If we can establish an independent civilization in the Alpha Centauri system, it would be able to send ships in the direction away from us, reaching a star in an astronaut's lifetime that we could not.

In this way, a wave of exploration can leapfrog outward in all directions, each new base being able to reach one or two or even three stars that others might not be able to get to. Humanity could then spread throughout the Galaxy over the space of several hundreds of thousands of years.

Contact need not involve travel alone. Each new world can maintain contact with nearby worlds by means of signals that travel at the speed of

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light. News can travel from one world to another in relays, and pass from one end of the galaxy to another in a hundred thousand years or so.

All that, however, is not the sort of interstellar travel, or the sort of Galactic Empire, that we science fiction writers are constantly describing.

No, for what we want, there simply must be faster-than-light travel. Nothing else will do. That has been a staple of science fiction ever since E. E. Smith introduced it in *The Skylark of Space* when it was published in 1928. Since then everyone, including me, has used it (with or without some plausible explanation).

Unfortunately, since I see nothing on the horizon that has much of a practical chance of giving us faster-than-speed light, I'm afraid that my Galactic Empire of the Foundation series is likely forever to remain — science fiction.

Nevertheless, I warn you, I have every intention of continuing to use it, just the same.

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This fine story about two remarkable members of a carnival comes from a 19-year-old student at the University of Washington. Mr. Corwin writes that his older brothers and sisters started him early on SF and fantasy; he has been writing for about three years and has taken a course from Joanna Russ.

Backwater Time

BY
MATT CORWIN

He would rise late and spend most of the day walking on dirt roads in the forests, which were made up of tall fir and pine except for a occasional clearing with new alder and old slash. He tried to keep from thinking about the past two years, hoping to eliminate them from his memory, to kill off that part of his mind. Sometimes he stopped and just stood, wondering if he was succeeding. Sometimes he'd sing. He sang simple songs that didn't disturb the rhythm of his walking — the song for driving tent pegs, the lullabies the animal trainers had sung when he was younger. He supposed they still sang them, seeing no reason why they would've stopped. He'd stop singing when he was reminded of the past more than distracted from it. The weeks slipped off somewhere as he took the abandoned back roads, the logging roads to cot-

tonwood season, then to the season of storms before fall. He thought he was somewhere in Oregon, for it smelled of rhododendrons and rain.

On his shoulder sat a small woman, a little under a foot and a half tall. She'd long black hair that hung down her back. It was tied in one tress with a bit of ribbon just as dark. She wore a white summer dress, and her wings were white, too, though they were marked with occasional dark V shapes. When spread, they spanned well over three feet, but now they were folded neatly, tips barely brushing his shoulders. Her right hand was tied loosely with kite string, the other end attached to a chain about his neck, along with a medal of Saint Christopher fording the river.

"I'll never leave you, Denny," she said in a small, low voice. Dennis continued walking and made no sign

he'd heard her. "I'll never leave you," she repeated, paused for him to answer, then repeated the phrase again. She said this for every twenty of his strides. He wanted to believe her. When she said it over and over and over, he almost did. In an hour the road was paved and they could see houses ahead. She stopped talking.

"We're out of food," he said finally, lifting her from his shoulder gently taking the string off her wrist. He took a grocery sack from his pack and unfolded it. She gathered her hair in front of her and pulled her wings in close, then climbed into the bag. He carefully folded the top and carried her toward the town.

"It should be only about ten minutes," he whispered to her just before stepping onto the main street. There were no stoplights and no cars driving about. A couple of dozen were parked along the three blocks with businesses. Except for the theater and the barbershop, the storefronts were dull, just windows and brick, or faded wood. He could hear the constant drone of a mill nearby. He quickly chose the Gold River Market, a corner grocery losing its whitewash. Five or six townspeople studied him as he crossed to the store. He thought that they recognized him. One thing he liked about his old job was the limited fame it brought him, the double takes of folk from the backwater towns on the circuit, never quite placing where they'd seen him.

Inside the store there was only a young woman at the counter reading *Mademoiselle*. She pretended to continue reading as he walked down the aisles with his bag. He picked a loaf of Wonder bread, a quart of milk, and some Jack cheese. He'd only two dollars and sixty-three cents and couldn't find a piece of Cheddar small enough. The clerk had blonde hair and was about nineteen. She didn't look at him like she knew him at all.

When the tabs came up on the old cash register, Dennis saw he wasn't in Oregon. The sales tax made him eleven cents short. He counted out his money and formed the numbers with his lips. When he glanced up, the woman was still staring at the money.

"I guess I'm short," he said. He felt like a bum. He knew he looked the bum's part; he hadn't shaved for nearly two months. She rang up an overage, subtracted it from the tab, and took his money. Her eyes were very narrow.

"Thank you," he said, and took the foil cap off the milk and held it out to her. She smiled and shook her head. He offered it again, and she took a small sip, then handed back the bottle. He drank some, replaced the foil, and she bagged it with the bread and cheese. "Thanks again," he said, and nodded respectfully. The little bell above the door rang as he left, and he wished he'd been more presentable.

"I hate to put you in there," he

said when he reached the edge of town and took her out of the sack. She looked very tired and was quiet until he began tying the string back on her wrist.

"You don't need to do that," she said. He tied it looser than before. He told himself that it would be simple for her to untie it if she wished. He pulled an aluminum plate from his pack and sliced some cheese with his jackknife.

"We're out of money," he said. "I'm going to have to start taking odd jobs when I get the chance. I know you don't like being penned up, but I don't see any other way." He drank some milk, then poured some into a small cup, letting bread soak up the overflow. "I'm surprised we went half a year, to tell you the truth." She sipped the milk and ate a little cheese.

"Let's just go back," she said when she finished eating. Her hair hid most of her face, and he couldn't tell she was crying. He'd never considered going back. She'd seemed so sad near the end, and he never wanted to see her cry again. He'd never thought she would want to go back.

"Do you really want to?"

"Let's just go back."

They waited until early evening, and she curled up in his coat as they walked to the town. He stopped at a phone booth on the side of the Exxon.

"Hello, Maddie? This is Dennis. Yeah, I'm coming back. Yes, the queen's with me. I'm at the gas sta-

tion in Gold River. Yeah, it's the only one. Exxon. Thanks. Good-bye, Maddie," he said, then hung up. "It'll be a little while," he told her, and slid down against the wall next to the booth, cradling her with his arm. He wondered who'd come to pick them up.

"I'm surprised they even wanted us back," he said, but she was asleep, her hair lying upon his neck, the color was indistinguishable from his own. It began to rain.

"Dennis!" an old man yelled, walking quickly toward him. "It's good to see you." It was Emerson, from the House of Skeletons. He'd been with the carnival as long as Dennis could remember.

"Likewise," he said, standing up and shaking his hand. They all got into Emerson's van, and he drove.

"How's my little queen?" Emerson said to her after she woke, and she smiled. "I didn't think I'd ever see her again," he said to Dennis, who didn't reply. Only Dennis knew she could speak. "Not much's happened while you were gone. Nothing much ever does." His hands carefully wrapped about the wheel, the tendons like a spider's web. Dennis's only description of the past six months was that they'd run out of money and were coming back. Emerson looked away from the road only once during the trip and said, "it's good to have you back." Dennis was glad. They reached the carnival at about ten

o'clock, and it was still open.

"I left Nicky to mind my place while I was gone," Emerson said, coming to his tent. He'd always treated Nicky like a nephew. Dennis didn't know if the old man had any blood kin. "He'll want to see you and the queen before you go to sleep. Nick! Dennis is back, and the queen!" Nick came running out of the tent, and stopped as if he'd just run into a chapel. The eight-year-old still believed the queen was real, unlike the majority of people who saw her.

"Welcome back," he said to the queen, then to Dennis. "Maddie's got a trailer set up for tonight, and your old tent all ready for tomorrow, and ham and eggs at nine."

"It's good to see you, Nicky," Dennis said, mussing up the boy's hair. He'd been gone only six months, but he felt as if the boy was getting too old for such things already.

"Thanks for watching the place, Nick. You better be off to bed now," Emerson said, slipping the boy a dollar. Then he motioned for Dennis to come inside.

The exhibit was rearranged so that the center of attention was the skeleton of a small saber-toothed tiger. All around the walls were posters depicting various extinct animals and famous saints. Beneath them were waist-high glass display cases, which also encircled the pedestal of the tiger. The tent was only about fifteen feet square, but it seemed only half that size.

"New addition," he said. "Bobcat and whale's teeth. Pretty convincing, eh? But that's not what I wanted to show you. Look at this." He pointed to a worktable in the back, then walked quickly over there and took off the sheet covering the table. Beneath was a collection of human bones, laid out anatomically, but not pinned.

"I finally got them shipped from Yugoslavia. Thirty years I've waited until I got enough money to ship him over. Bribes, you know. Had a guy sign that this was my cousin," he said with a smile.

"Who was it?" Dennis finally asked.

"Who was it? Can't you tell? It's Icarus. Icarus," he said. He traced his finger along a rib. "This is what lured me into this business. I wanted you to see what I did. It's still the best." Dennis nodded in agreement, in admiration, and the queen merely watched his face.

"I wanted to show it to you because I knew you'd understand its greatness if anyone could. I was diving, long about 1955, for salvage from World War II out in the Mediterranean, and I saw him on the rocks." He acted out the story, making little paddling strokes with his hands, bringing them to his mouth in surprise. "There he was — the wax melted on most of the bones, the remains of a copper blade — I tried to remember exactly the position he was in, and took the bones up. And I couldn't take him out of the country, but now I've got him."

"Congratulations," Dennis said, clasping him on the shoulder. "I think I understand how you feel. When will it dethrone the bobcat?" The queen never looked at the bones. She studied Dennis's face.

"Never," he said, smoothing over his thinning hair. "I thought about it all this week. Most of the people wouldn't believe me. Maybe if I pinned big wax wings on it and made up a bunch of identifying features like three fingers on his right hand or something, but I couldn't do that. Not with him. And I don't think I'd like to see anyone laughing at his bones. I'm sort of a curator, you know. I have a responsibility to these bones." He waved his hands encompassingly.

"I understand. Thanks for showing me this, Emerson. Thanks a lot, but we'd better call it a night."

"I knew you'd understand. I'll show you to the trailer." He led them across the carnival, picking a path so no old colleagues of Dennis and the queen would stop them and keep them up any longer.

Maddie had made up the queen's old cot and a regular cot for Dennis. He lay facing the other wall so the queen could change into her old nightclothes Maddie had left out.

He hadn't lain on a bed for over three months, and he fell asleep without changing.

He dreamed again that the queen was just a woman, a regular woman of normal size. He hadn't dreamed that

since he'd left the carnival; and upon waking, he began regretting coming back.

He used two disposable razors shaving. She was still asleep. He'd forgotten about the scar on his cheek beneath his left eye, now barely visible. He put on the clothes Maddie had left out, and sat for half an hour watching her sleep in her little bed, her eyelids barely fluttering.

She woke and smiled.

"Turn around," she said, and he did. She quickly put on her queen's dress and crown, and touched him on his shoulder with her toy wand. Her hair was wrapped about her shoulders like a rich mantle.

"You're beautiful," he said, and he felt bad taking out the string. "The boss expects me to. You know that. No more one hand, either. I'm sorry. I'll tie it loose." He wrapped it gently about her feet and attached the other end to his necklace. He prayed that she wouldn't cry. She didn't.

Maddie fixed them some bacon and eggs. She kissed both Dennis and the queen. Nicky had fixed up the tent for the queen exactly as it was before, down to the same gilded throne and four-by-four-foot cage.

The people started arriving at about ten, and Dennis fell so quickly into the routine of the barker that he frightened himself. He lied without hesitation, about how he had found the Fairy Queen and had won her in a battle with the animals she controlled

with her songs. He was tempted to tell them the truth, how he had found her wounded with buckshot and had nursed her back to health, but he knew that wasn't what they wanted to hear. And she acted along with all of his tales, timing the straightening of her wings with the climaxes of action, and posturing royally in between. Yet he could feel her suffering. It covered him like a sweat, and lingered bitterly beneath his tongue. He lied the same lie all day, for there were many people who came twice. He knew they couldn't believe she was real, that they were looking for the wires, the mirrors, the radio control. Sometimes he wished they'd find what they were looking for.

And when the last group before dinner left, Nicky came in .

"You want me to bring you two some grub?" he asked.

"No. No. We'll go over to Mad-die's. She invited you, too. Go run ahead and tell her we're coming," he told the boy, who dutifully ran upon his errand like a little page.

"No, leave the flap. We'll be right out," he called after Nicky, and the boy did.

Dennis glanced over to the queen in her cage. She was still looking the queen's part and gave him a royal wave and a faint smile. Her eyes were a dull blue, though, like unglazed porcelain. He began to weep and opened up her cage.

He watched her eyes dart a glance to the door, and he knew at that moment she was going to fly away. She swept across the length of the tent and, as she turned in midair, looked back. "Please don't cry. Please don't cry," she said, and flew to him. She dried his tears with her hair.

Coming soon

Next month: Two fine fantasies by John Morressy ("The Quality of Murphy") and Ian Watson ("Evil Water"), along with science fiction from James White ("The Interpreters") and George Alec Effinger ("Skylab Done It"). Watch for the March issue, on sale February 3, or send us the coupon on page 152.

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(Continued on page 162)

F&SF Crossword

BY DOROTHY DAVIS

ACROSS

- 1 Rawboned person
6 Many
10 ——Trek
14 Raccoon's tropical relative
15 Nonsense
16 Benjamin Franklin used one
17 Up
18 Liver secretion
19 Jane Austen novel
20 Isaac Asimov novel
23 Otherworldly
24 Killer whale
25 Apollo or Viking
29 Some Terrans
34 Military blockade
35 Site of Kaaba and Zamzam
36 Macrogametes
37 Biblical preposition
38 "Commedia" author
39 Arthur C. Clarke novel
40 Here, to 47 down
41 Karloff
42 Willie——, chocolate maker
43 "——and His Boy," C.S. Lewis novel
45 Poked
46 Hobbit elf
47 Amt.
48 L. Sprague De Camp novel
57 Captain——
58 "The—— Through Space": Marion Zimmer Bradley
59 ——Calvino, author of "Cosmicomics"
60 Eagle
61 Piers Anthony's——Series

- 62 Moved ahead cautiously
63 Comfortable
64 Wooden bar
65 "All Flesh Is——": Simak

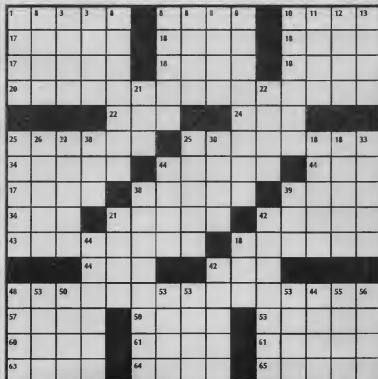
DOWN

- 1 Scoot
2 British blackjack
3 Valuation
4 Axiom follower
5 Camelopard
6 Irish theatre
7 ——Lane
8 Scandinavian center
9 "May——be with you"
10 Comic variety act
11 "The——Machine": H.G. Wells
12 Look——
13 Veracious
21 Kong's doc
22 Malaga Miss (abbrev.)
25 "Have——Will Travel": Heinlein
26 Harness
27 Do a hitch again
28 Past
29 "——, meenie..."
30 Luke's sequel
31 "Many——": Thurber story
32 Conjure
33 Water nymph
35 Bradbury setting
38 Movie star, singer, animal lover
39 "——Years to Christmas": J.T. McIntosh

- 41 Adriatic north wind
 42 Devouring
 44 A puckish game?
 45 Melted caramels
 47 Father of modern science fiction
 48 A word between Friends
 49 Circe dance
 50 Ages

- 51 Dorothy's dog
 52 Seem
 53 "Believe——Not"
 54 Tabula——
 55 Cheers
 56 Bobs gently

Answer will appear in the March issue.



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